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# Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions in Regard to Sex Offenders, SORN, and Residency Restrictions Laws

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Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions in Regard to Sex Offenders, SORN, and  
Residency Restrictions Laws

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Criminal Justice & Criminology

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by  
Maria Aparcero-Suero  
May 2017

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Dr. Chris Rush, Chair  
Dr. Jennifer Pealer  
Dr. Nicole Prior

Keywords: Law Enforcement, Sex Offenders, SORN, Residency Restrictions

## ABSTRACT

Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions in Regard to Sex Offenders, SORN, and Residency

Restrictions Laws

by

Maria Aparcero-Suero

The purpose of this study was to extend current knowledge regarding law enforcement's perceptions of sex offenders. Law enforcement's views of sex offenders and the fairness and efficacy of sex offender laws were examined through the utilization of a 60 closed-ended question survey. The survey included questions about sex offender myths, sex offender laws, police officers' experience in working with sex offenders, specialized training, and demographics. The sample consisted of 74 sworn police officers from a Southeastern state. The results showed that, despite having a mostly empirical based view of sex offenders, sworn police officers were likely to support sex offender laws shown by some scholars to be ineffective in reducing crime and at times counterproductive.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	7
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	14
Sex Offender Laws .....	14
SORN and Residential Restrictions Laws .....	17
Unintended Consequences .....	19
Misconceptions and Myths Underlying Sex Offender Laws .....	20
Empirical Evidence against Sex Offender Myths .....	22
Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions.....	25
Law Enforcement Training .....	30
Theoretical Framework: Labeling Theory .....	32
Labeling Theory and Sex Offenders .....	35
Labeling and Law Enforcement's Perceptions .....	37
The Present Study .....	38
3. METHODOLOGY .....	40
Research Methods and Hypotheses .....	40
Research Design, Constructs, and Variables .....	43
Dependent Variables .....	44
Independent Variables .....	49
Sample .....	52
Methods and Analysis .....	55
Data Cleaning .....	55

Analysis .....	55
Validity and Limitations .....	57
4. RESULTS .....	59
Hypothesis 1 .....	59
Hypothesis 2 .....	62
Hypothesis 3 .....	66
Hypothesis 4 .....	67
Hypothesis 5 .....	67
Conclusion .....	68
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	70
Discussion of Findings .....	71
Future Research .....	79
Policy Implications .....	82
Conclusion .....	86
REFERENCES .....	88
APPENDIX: Survey .....	106
VITA .....	116

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter	Page
1. Attributes of the variables and codes .....	51
2. Descriptive Statistics for the Research Sample .....	53
3. Percentage of police officers who believed each sex offender myths .....	61
4. Percentage of police officers who agreed with each statement in the law scale .....	64
5. Percentage of police officers who believed the following offenders should be subject to SORN regulations .....	66
6. Hypothesis 5: Multiple Regression Analysis .....	68

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Sex offenders cause fear in communities and long-lasting consequences for the victims; therefore, their behavior was managed, controlled, and prevented. In addition, sex offenders' crimes invoked strong media coverage and fearful feelings from legislators and the public at large, which often resulted in quick legislative actions. Most current sex offender laws arose from murders of children at the hands of sex offenders (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006; Vasquez, Maddan & Walker, 2008). In this situation, emotional arguments rather than rational ones were likely to dominate the policy-making process (Bank, 2004), and laws to control sex offenders were enacted. The purpose of sex offender laws such as registration, notification, and residency restrictions policies was to inform the public about the location of convicted sex offenders, improve the safety of children by distancing sex offenders for places where children congregated (Walker Golden, & VanHouten 2001), and decrease reoffending (Vasquez et al., 2008).

Since the enactments of such laws, most research in sex offenders has focused on the formation of sex offender laws and their unintended consequences such as homelessness, unemployment, emotional instability, societal stigmatization, and limited housing options (Chajewski & Mercado, 2009; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles, et al., 2012; Tewksbury & Jennings, 2010; Welchans, 2005; Zgoba, Veysey, & Dalessandro, 2010). Researchers have also explored how unintended consequences may contribute to increase the probability of reoffending after releasing from prison; thereby, undermining the designed purpose of the laws (Barnes, Dukes, Tewksbury, & DeTroye, 2009; Levenson & Cotter 2005; Levenson, Zgoba, & Tewksbury, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Sandler et al., 2008; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury



& Connor, 2014; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006, 2007; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2007). In light of that research, sex offender laws may have affected sex offenders, and may have the potential to induce misdirected moral panic in community members who resided close to them due to the danger often perceived by their presence (Goffman, 1963; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006).

Further evaluation of the current sex offender laws has shown public fear and the justification of the enactment of these laws were based on myths and misconceptions about this type of offenders. The general public believed both that sex offenders were more dangerous than other offenders and would inevitable reoffend (Levenson & Hern, 2007; Sample & Bray, 2003; Walker 2007; Vasquez et al., 2008); however, these perceptions were inconsistent with empirical evidence about sex offenders' characteristics and recidivism rates (Duwe, Donnay & Tewksbury, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008; Vasquez et al., 2008). That stereotyping description of sex offender had the potential to lead to negative perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward sex offenders (Becker, 1963). Specifically, relevant to this study, whether that definition of sex offenders based on myths influenced law enforcement's perceptions requires being addressed. However, not many studies have focused on those who enforce the rules. "To date, there have been fewer than one dozen studies addressing criminal justice officers' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences with respect to sex offenders and sex offender laws" (Mustaine, Tewksbury, Connor, & Payne, 2015). And even fewer studies have included law enforcement officers as part of their sample (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Hogue, 1993; Lea, Auburn, Kibblewhite, 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). Consequently, further examination of this topic is paramount due to the possible impact of

law enforcement officers' perceptions in working with sex offenders, alerting community members, and in policy making.

In particular, there is a gap in the literature on how police officers' perceptions and beliefs are influenced by the stereotypical image of sex offenders. This image tends to be based on assumptions and myths underlying sex offender laws. Additionally, further knowledge is necessary in how law enforcement officers' attitudes may affect their effectiveness when working with suspects of sex crimes. Therefore, the interaction between sex offender myths, the content of sex offender laws, the perceptions of law enforcement officers, and the impact of training in working with sex offenders requires being addressed. The study of law enforcement's attitudes and beliefs about sex offenders and sex offender laws is necessary because they are the first step in the criminal justice process, and how they treat sex offenders has the potential to influence the way in which they are managed and, ultimately, whether or not these offenders desist from criminal behavior (Mustaine et al., 2015). Moreover, law enforcement officers' perceptions regarding sex offenders and sex offender laws may be especially valuable to policymakers by providing first-hand information about the implementation, enforcement, and impact of these policies on criminal justice officials and offenders.

The present research attempts to answer the research question: *How do law enforcement officers perceive sex offenders and sex offender laws?* This research question was assessed by examining the perceptions of sworn police officers regarding sex offenders, and their beliefs about the fairness and efficacy of laws affecting this population, including registration, community notification (SORN), and residency restrictions laws. Unlike previous research in the area, the present thesis incorporated to what extent sworn police officers supported myths associated to sex offenders and their knowledge of the unintended consequences of sex offender

laws. To answer the primary question, sworn police officers in a medium size state in the southeastern of the United States completed an electronically administered survey (see Appendix) that included questions in four areas: general information about sex offenders, sex offender laws, law enforcement's training, and demographics. Information about sworn police officers' experience and training within the criminal justice system were analyzed in order to determine whether those variables may have an impact on the attitudes and perceptions in regards to sex offenders held by police officers. The implications of this research included providing key information to develop scientific-based educational and practical trainings with the purpose of facilitating the practice of those who worked with sex offenders and/or their victims. To a large extent, this study may also benefit the society as a whole by providing information that could lead to more rational and effective laws.

Specifically, the present research aimed at the following objectives: a) To determine whether sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders were consistent with myths associated to that population of offenders; b) To examine whether there was a relationship between agreeing with sex offender myths and supporting sex offender laws; c) To provide data on police officers' support of sex offender registration, community notification, and residency restriction laws; d) To determine whether law enforcement training in sex offenders affected sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders; and e) To analyze whether police officers' perceptions of sex offenders were related to the amount of contact they had with that population. To achieve those objectives, a 60 closed-ended question survey designed by the author was used. The survey was created by combining four items from the *Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale* (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008), two items from the *Attitudes Toward the Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO) scale* (Wnuk, Chapman, & Jeglic,

2006), series of items used in previous studies (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Mustaine et al., 2015; Redlich, 2001), and additional questions based on results and gaps in previous research (e.g. Conley et al., 2011; Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999). Those items were selected for their relevance for the purpose of this particular research. The rest of items that were not chose from previously established scales were developed on the basis of statements commonly encountered by the researchers regarding sex offender myths, sex offender laws, and the impact of training and experience on perceptions toward sex offenders. The survey collected knowledge of sex offenders, perception of laws such as registration and community notification (SORN), and residency restrictions, police officers' training and experience in working with sex offenders, and demographics.

The survey was open for three months, from October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, to January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. A total of 74 sworn police officers from a Southeastern medium state completed the survey. The data collected through the survey allowed the researcher to answer the objectives formulated. SPSS software was used to conduct frequency distributions, descriptive statistics, independent sample T-tests, and multiple regression analyses. Those analyses provided information about sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offender myths and sex offender laws. It was also examined whether support of sex offender myths was significantly related to support of sex offender laws. Additionally, the impact of years of experience working in the criminal justice system, direct contact with sex offenders, and specialized training on sworn police officers' perception of sex offenders was inspected.

The results of those analyses indicated most sworn police officers in the sample had some empirical based knowledge of sex offenders' characteristics, but they were mostly unaware of sex offenders' recidivism rates and the unintended consequences of sex offender laws.

Consistent with previous findings regarding law enforcement's perceptions of sex offenders, police officers' opinions were more likely to be based on sex offender myths when questions focused on safety and recidivism rates. They believed most sex offenders reoffended at much higher rates compared to other criminals and could not be rehabilitated (Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). Additionally, sworn police officers seemed not to be familiar with the unintended consequences of sex offender laws reported by some researchers (Bruell et al., 2008; Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Levenson, 2008, 2010; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006). Independently of their knowledge about sex offenders and the unintended consequences of the laws, most sworn police officers supported sex offender laws and believed they were fair and effective in reducing sex offenses, despite the lack of empirical evidence supporting their efficacy. This result further substantiated previous findings regarding law enforcement's support of laws enacted to control sex offenders (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001).

Furthermore, sworn police officers with more years worked in the criminal justice system were more likely to support sex offender myths and laws; however, these relationships were not statistically significant. No effects of specialized training and contact with sex offenders in sworn police officers' perceptions of that population were found. These results did not corroborate previous research supporting that specialized training and exposure to sex offenders influenced attitudes toward this population by increasing knowledge and reducing the impact of the stereotyping image of sex offenders (Craig, 2005; Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Hogue, 1993; Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Redlich, 2001; Read et al., 2009; Taylor, Keddle, & Lee, 2003; Weekes, Pelletier, & Beaudette, 1995). Further examination of the

content and duration of the training and type of contact with sex offenders may be necessary to draw a conclusion about the impact of these variables in law enforcement's perception and knowledge of sex offenders.

The policy implications associated with this study were the improvement of SORN system, training for community members and criminal justice professionals, and potential modifications of the current sex offender laws. Improving the accuracy of the information included in the sex offender registry may be required for the purposes of tracking and monitoring sex offenders and informing the public about sex offenders in their community. Community members should be informed about the characteristics of sex offenders and their victims, their likelihood of reoffending, and preventive measures that they may adopt if needed. Consequently, it may be crucial that police officers acquire empirical based knowledge about his population of offenders and the laws aimed at them. Finally, due to the overwhelming evidence that sex offender laws did not deter or reduce sex crimes, SORN and residency restrictions laws may need to be amended.

The next chapter addressed prior literature available on sex offender laws, sex offender myths, law enforcement's perceptions, and the impact of training in law enforcement officers' perceptions toward sex offenders and the laws affecting them. Chapter 3 included research questions and hypotheses associated with this research, data collection instruments, sample descriptive information, and the analytical analysis conducted to test the hypotheses. Chapter 4 discussed the findings delineated by each research question for this study. The final chapter provided a conclusion of the main results obtained in this research, training and policy implications associated with this study, explored study limitations, and proposed possibilities for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the current research was to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officials about sex offenders, and the laws intended to increase public safety and reduce sex crimes, specifically SORN and residency restrictions regulations. This study pursued to extend the limited existing knowledge about police officers' beliefs about the laws aimed at this particular population of offenders, and the extent to which their opinion about sex offenders were based on scientific evidence or popular myths. In this chapter, empirical works relevant to this study were discussed by first providing a brief review of the history of sex offender laws and focusing on the characteristics of registration, notification (SORN), and residency restrictions laws. It was followed by a discussion of the unintended consequences of those regulations. Next, the misconceptions about sex offenders were described and refuted by empirical evidence. Previous studies about law enforcement's beliefs about sex offenders and the impact of specialized training in their perceptions were also addressed. The last session focused on the theoretical framework, using labeling theory as an attempt to explain police officers' perceptions about sex offenders and sex offender laws. The goal of this chapter was to provide a broad understanding of the empirical works relevant to this thesis.

#### **Sex Offender Laws**

The emergence of current sex offender laws began in the 1990s. These laws were created amidst high profile cases involving sexual offenses against children. In 1990, Westley Alan Dodd sexually molested, tortured, and murdered three young boys in Washington State. In the same year and state, Earl Shriner kidnapped and sexually assaulted a 7-year-old boy, cut off his

penis, and left him for dead (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). Consequently, the state of Washington became the first state to pass the Community Protection Act of 1990, which included America's first community notification statute, and a provision for civil commitment of sexual offenders (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). In 1994, Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, part of the Federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, in Jacob Wetterling's honor. Jacob was abducted when he was 11-year-old in St. Joseph, Minnesota (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). This Act required each state to create a sex offender registry that could be used by law enforcement officers. Failure to comply with this Act resulted in a 10 percent loss of federal funds from the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). Jacob Wetterling Act was later extended by Megan's Law (1996). In 1994, 7-year-old Megan Kanka was raped and killed by a neighbor who was a recidivist pedophile. Community members wondered how recidivist sex offenders were living in their neighborhood without their knowledge. As a result, sex offender registries were made public to inform the community about sex offenders living in their area (Terry & Ackerman, 2015).

In 1997, President Bill Clinton enacted a federal version of Megan's Law (Terry & Furlong, 2008). All states were required to implement both the federal Megan's Law and the Jacob Wetterling Law (RCNLs). Nonetheless, registration and community notification statutes and guidelines differed from state to state. Those differences between states in relation to who had to be registered and for how long, as well as the information included in those registries made it difficult to track offenders across states (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). Thus, The Pam Lychner Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act of 1996 attempted to establish a



National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR). It established a national database at the FBI that included criminals convicted of a sexually violent offense or an offense against a minor.

In 2000, the Campus Sex Crimes Prevention Act was included as a new section (Section 170101) in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (42 U.S.C. 14071). It required sex offenders to inform law enforcement agencies about institutions of higher education that they attended for school or for employment. Twenty-five years after 6-year-old Adam Walsh's murder, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (AWA) was enacted in 2006 (Terry, 2013). It focused on preventing the brutal abductions, rapes, and murders of victims by strangers. The AWA established national standards mainly on registration and notification, child pornography prevention, civil commitment, and Internet safety, and it made failure to register as a sex offender a deportable offense for immigrants (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). In addition, the AWA extended registration to juvenile sex offenders designated as at least 14-year-old at the time of the offense.

The Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) was one of the main components of the AWA (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). SORNA provided uniform guidelines for registration of sex offenders for all states in terms of duration and accuracy of registry information. It tried to inform the public about where sex offenders resided and potentially prevented victimizations. However, most states have failed to enact RCNL statutes in accordance with SORNA guidelines. Some states have resisted the adoption of SORNA, while others have deviated from SORNA requirements (SMART, 2013). Some states have considered the 14 requirements of SORNA excessive and unnecessary with no improvement of public safety (Boyd, 2011; GAO, 2013; Sugarman, 2011). Others have seemed the expansion of public registration to low-risk and juvenile offenders as detrimental to rehabilitation approaches and as

a way to take limited resources away from focusing on the most dangerous sex offenders (Boyd, 2011; Grinberg, 2011). The financial and personnel costs associated with the implementation of SORNA have also been a reason for deviating from SORNA mandates (Boyd, 2011; GAO, 2013; Sugarman, 2011). In addition to registration and notification regulations, residency restriction policies were implemented to control where sex offenders could live and protect children (Levenson & Zgorba, 2015).

Since the early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of laws enacted to increase sentences for sex offenders. The most notable policies that have been enacted were the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, Megan's Law, the Pam Lychner Sex Offender Tracking and Identification Act, and the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 (AWA). Additionally, many states and local jurisdictions have enacted additional supervision, management, and treatment policies such as residency restrictions, civil commitment, mandatory chemical castration, GPS tracking, and community supervision for life (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). The present research focused on Sex Offender Notification and Registration (SORN) laws and Residency Restriction policies.

### **SORN and Residential Restrictions Laws**

Apart from incarceration for their offenses, convicted sex offenders have been subject to a range of identification and surveillance strategies including registration with local law enforcement, public notification of their identity and information, and restrictions about the places they may live in and be around. The purpose of these regulations was to inform community members about the location of sex offenders to promote self-protection and potentially prevent victimizations (Lynch, 2002). Even though federal guidelines have been passed, each state may have their own requirements. In general terms, SORN laws required most

sex offenders to register their addresses and personal information such as name, alias, social security number, employer and address, license plate number, and the convicted offense (Sec. 113 & 114) with local law enforcement agencies. Most of those required to register were also subject to community notification, wherein their information was released to the public (SMART, 2013). In some states, sex offenders had to be registered before releasing from prison or within three days of a non-imprisonment sentence (Evans, Lytle, & Sample, 2015). A three-tier classification system was sometimes used to classify sex offenders in line with the type of crime that they committed, which determined the duration for registration, regardless of their assessed risk for reoffending (SMART, 2013).

In relation to residential restriction laws, they prohibited sex offenders for living near to areas frequented by children including schools, parks, daycare centers, and school bus stops (Nieto & Jung, 2006). More strict state and local laws forbade convicted sex offenders from living or being within 2,500 feet of places where children congregate. These restrictions were imposed in Miami Beach in 2005 and are still in force (Levenson & Zgorba, 2015). SORN and residential restriction laws were intended to promote public awareness and safety, to deter sexual offending, to provide tools to law enforcement to monitor and tracking sex offenders, and to solve sex crimes (Rudin, 1996; Tewksbury, 2002, 2005). Nonetheless, the fairness and effectiveness of these laws have been questioned because they seem to be based on popular myths and assumptions about sex offenders that have not been empirically supported (Jenkins, 1998; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Samples & Bray, 2003; Zimring, 2004). Thus, SORN and residency restrictions regulations have been found to have flaws and causing unintended consequences in sex offenders and law enforcement agencies, which may contribute to the

increase of recidivism rates (Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Peirce, 2008; Tewksbury, 2007).

### **Unintended Consequences**

Laws and policies aimed at sex offenders may provoke more damage than good for the offender, the public, and the criminal justice system. In relation to sex offenders, they may have problems finding stable housing, employment, and social support (Levenson, 2010; Meloy, 2005; Willis & Grace, 2009). Levenson (2010) identified three unintended consequences of sex offender residence restrictions: 1) diminished housing availability; 2) homelessness or transience; and 3) clustering of sex offenders in certain geographical areas. This law prohibited sex offenders from living within 1,000-2,500 feet, depending on the state, from areas where children congregate. The problem was that the majority of residential dwellings were located within that prohibited area (Zandbergen & Hart, 2006), and those outside that area were usually not affordable by sex offenders (Bruell, Swatt, & Sample, 2008). Furthermore, landlords usually refused to rent to them when they found out that they were registered as sex offenders (Levenson, 2008). As a result, homeless colonies of sex offenders have emerged in areas with high social disorganization and low social control and, therefore, are less able to provide protective measures for vulnerable children (Socia & Stamatel, 2012). Under these constrictions, previous research has found sex offenders may be more likely to engage in criminal careers as a way to survive in a society that have not allowed them to reintegrate (Becker, 1963; Hanson, 2000; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Miethe, Olson, & Mitchell, 2006; Ragusa-Salerno, Ostermann & Thomas, 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

Law enforcement agencies were also impacted by sex offender laws. There were problems concerning funding and lack of staff to implement SORN laws and supervise the compliance of residence restrictions (Gaines, 2006). In addition, these laws required that attention be focused on this population taking resources away from other projects and crimes (Gaines, 2006). Also, these policies considered sex offenders as a homogenous group, what might lead law enforcement agencies to not differentiate sex offenders in accordance with their risk to recidivate. Consequently, resources might be spent on individuals with low risk of recidivism instead of investing them in those who posed a higher threat to society (Levenson, 2007). Another consequence of sex offender laws was that law enforcement officers might wrongly assume that sex offenders were likely to commit more sexual crimes. As a result, when they investigated a sex crime, they might be more likely to narrow the search to registered sex offenders, which could increase the victimization risks from those offenders who were unknown by the criminal justice system (Simon, 2000; Hanson, Scott, & Steffy, 1995). An additional limitation of the sex offender registry, in part due to the frequent relocation of sex offenders, is that this database was often outdated (Terry & Ackerman, 2015). Researchers examining these unintended consequences of sex offender laws have suggested that their occurrence was due to the fact that the laws were based on myths and misconceptions regarding sex offenders (Jenkins, 1998; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Samples & Bray, 2003; Zimring, 2004). The next section addresses the myths associated to this particular population and the lack of empirical evidence supporting these misconceptions.

### **Misconceptions and Myths Underlying Sex Offender Laws**

Sex offender laws were created as a consequence of sensationalized and exceptional cases that led to the formation of images of sexual offenders as criminals that must be punished

and removed from the society. That stereotypical image of sex offenders was what justifies the formation of laws focused on punishment, control, and surveillance (Jenkins, 1998; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Samples & Bray, 2003; Zimring, 2004), and this in turn legitimized such policies and reinforced the label of sex offenders as individuals especially dangerous (Banks, 2004; Feeley & Simon, 1992; Simon, 2000).

Previous studies have analyzed the assumptions underlying the dominant contemporary image of sex offenders and the laws enacted to control them. The main characteristics involved males who were persistent and specialist in their behavioral patterns (Miethe, Olson, & Mitchell, 2006; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006), unable to be rehabilitated (Feeley & Simon, 1992), highly dangerousness for the society (Feeley & Simon, 1992; Simon, 2000), victimized children (Bank, 2004; Evans et al., 2015; Sample, 2006), stranger to their victims (Sample, 2006), and sexually motivated (Groth, 1979).

The community, legislators and, consequently, sex offender laws assumed that sex offenders would inevitably recidivate with new sexual offenses (Miethe, Olson, & Mitchell, 2006; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006) and could not be rehabilitated (Feeley & Simon, 1992). Sex offenders were seen as permanently dangerous criminals who would not stop victimizing sexually until they get caught and incapable of change or being rehabilitated (Feeley & Simon, 1992). Sex offenders were perceived as uniquely threatening in comparison to other types of felons (Banks, 2004; Feeley & Simon, 1992; Simon, 2000).

The community and legislators also agreed to the premise that sex offenders were prone to kill their victims, who were usually children (Evans et al., 2015; Sample, 2006). Children were considered to be more vulnerable to sexual abuse and molestation (Bank, 2004; Evans et al., 2015) and the only victims who did nothing to instigate their victimization (Groth, 1979; Holmes

& Holmes, 2009). On the contrary, older female victims might be assumed to be at least partially responsible of their own victimization, and males might be rarely considered as possible target of sexual criminality (Groth, 1979; Holmes & Holmes, 2009). In those cases, misconceptions and myths surrounding sex crimes tended to shift the responsibility from the offender to something outside of him/her, including drugs or blaming the victim (Groth, 1979).

Furthermore, it was implied that sex offenders were often strangers to their victims (Sample, 2009) and attacked them to obtain sexual gratification (Groth, 1979). As a result, these assumptions gave rise to the “sex offender label” as a homogenous group (Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006) of male perpetrators who could not control their sexual compulsion for children or women (Groth, 1979), were likely to kill their victims (Sample, 2006), and who seldom knew their attackers (Sample, 2009). That social constructed image of sex offenders has not been supported by empirical evidence. It seems to be more reflective of the misconceptions of the legislators and the public regarding sex offenders. Hence, the laws aimed to control this population may not be based on the true risk that these offenders represent for the public as scientific studies display.

### **Empirical Evidence against Sex Offenders Myths**

Sex offender laws were based on assumptions that have not been supported by empirical evidence (Levenson et al., 2007; Lilly et al., 2015). Research has shown females also committed sexual offenses (Freeman & Sandler, 2008; Vandiver, 2006; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2010). Some females sex offenders acted independently, whereas others had a co-offender during the commission of the abuse (Vandiver, 2006; Wijkman et al., 2010). The latter type of female sex offenders co-offended with or was coerced by their intimate partner. In those cases, her victims were her own children or relatives. When they acted

alone they were more likely to offend victims outside their family (Vandiver, 2006; Wijkman et al., 2010).

Furthermore, in contrast to the common opinion that sex offenders were persistent and specialist in their behavioral patterns (Levenson & Cotter, 2005), research has found sexual recidivism was relatively low, and these offenders were more likely to commit subsequent non-sexual offenses such as parole violations, pornography, property and public order crimes (Hanson, 2000; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Miethe et al., 2006; Ragusa-Salerno, Ostermann & Thomas, 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). In general, sex offender recidivism rates were lower when compared to other crime categories (Bartosh, Garby, Lewis & Gray, 2003; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). A specific example of the influence of sex offender myths in the laws may be residential restrictions, which were based on the assumption that most sex offenders reoffended. Empirical evidence supporting that residential restrictions reduced the sex offender recidivism rate has not been found (Nobles, Levenson, & Youstin, 2012). Contrary, researchers have suggested that these laws may increase sexual recidivism by making it more difficult to track and supervise sex offenders (NAESV, 2006), as well as by reducing informal social controls and gathering sex offenders, which may facilitate interactions between sex offenders, reinforcement of negative behavior, and, in turn, an increase in recidivism (Meloy, 2005; Ward & Beech 2005; Willis & Grace, 2009). Additionally, opposite to the popular myth that sex offenders could not be rehabilitated, studies have shown that specialized treatment, such as cognitive-behavioral treatment and integrated strength-based treatment program (Marschall & Marshall, 2014), could reduce the likelihood of recidivism (Alexander, 1999; Hall, 1995;



Hanson, Bourgon, Helmus, & Hodgson, 2009; Hanson et al., 2002; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Losel & Schmucker, 2005).

It was also assumed that all sex offenders were highly dangerous for society, especially for children; however, this population formed a heterogeneous group with different backgrounds, motives, and risks of reoffending (Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Sample & Bray, 2003; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Walker, 2007). There were sex offenders who committed sexual offenses against family members, also called incest offenders, and offenders who committed sexual offenses outside of their immediate family or non-incestuous offenders (Doren, 1998). There were two subtypes of non-incestuous offenders: 1) those whose victims were underage, referred to as extra-familial child molesters, and 2) those who committed sexual offenses against females who were at least 18 years old, called rapists (male victims were not included in this definition) (Doren, 1998). Additionally, more extensive definitions of sex offenders included individuals who offended sexually in non-physical ways such as making obscene phone calls, exposing their genitals publicly, watching child pornography, among others. Research has shown each type of sex offender differed in recidivism rates. Most studies have found that rapists were more likely to reoffend than child molesters (Bartosh, et al., 2003; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Marques, Day, Nelson, & West, 1994; Quinsey, Rice, & Harris, 1995; Quinsey, Khanna, & Malcolm, 1998). Also, those arrested for child pornography, juvenile pimping, or soliciting a juvenile prostitute were found to be more likely to be rearrested for another sex crime than child molesters, rapists, or pedophiles (Sample & Bray, 2006). In the current study, all types of sexual aggressors were classified together and categorized as sex offenders.

Furthermore, opposite to the premise underling sex offender laws, studies have suggested that, in general, sex offenders rarely killed their victims (Francis & Soothill, 2000; Sample, 2006), and most victims of sex crimes knew their attackers and trusted them including family members, friends, and acquaintances (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005; Snyder, 2000; Terry & Ackerman, 2015). Their crimes were more likely motivated by power and control than sexual desire (Groth, 1979). Sexual offenses and control over the victim were the way those offenders expressed power and anger. Those individuals tended to be sexually active but the sexual offense was their mean to manage underlying conflicts and problems in the individual, such as an inability to establish healthy relationships with others or cope with stress (Groth, 1979).

Given the lack of empirical support for the assumptions about sex offenders' characteristics underlying sex offender laws, and the unintended consequences in sex offenders, the criminal justice system, and the society as a whole, it might be unlikely that these laws would prevent sex crimes and protect the general population. Additionally, that stereotypical image of sex offenders might also affect law enforcement's perceptions about this population and the manner they behaved with suspects of sexual offenses which, in turn, could impact whether those offenders reoffended or stopped committing crimes. The next section reviews the existing literature about law enforcement officers' perceptions in relation to sex offenders and sex offender laws.

### **Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions**

Through training, law enforcement officers were socialized in the criminal justice system, and thus, they may be more likely to accept the sex offender label and support laws, despite of the empirical evidence against the effectiveness of some policies (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012). Because of their role in facilitating public safety and enforcing sex offender laws, as well

as the current attention to these laws and sex crimes in general, law enforcement officers may be more pressured to enforce the application of these rules and more likely to internalize the sex offender label upon which the laws are based without further analysis of their content. That stereotypical image may affect law enforcement's perceptions and attitudes about this particular population and bias the way they guide, manage, and intervene in sex offender cases. In line with the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948), law enforcement officers' negative perceptions of sex offenders might directly or indirectly lead to a confrontational interaction with these criminals which, in turn, could make sex offenders more aggressive and unwilling to cooperate with the criminal justice system (Mustaine et al., 2015; Paternoster, Brame, Bachman, & Sherman, 1997; Sherman, 2000). Thus, law enforcement officers' behavior including investigation and detection may be related to their perceptions of sex offenders and could affect the suspect future actions.

In general, to justify and maintain their position, law enforcement officials might be likely to admit that the problem still exists on a broad scale, but their efforts were effective and helping to solve the problem (Becker, 1983). Additionally, rule enforcers might consider others should respect them and, thus, they might coerce respect from the individuals they dealt with. As a consequence, enforcement officials might enforce rules and label someone as deviant because he/she showed disrespect to the enforcer rather than because he/she broke the law (Becker, 1983). Furthermore, enforcement officials might use their discretion to prioritize the problems they had to deal with, handling the most pressing problems first (Becker, 1983). Thus, in line with Becker's labeling theory (1963), it seemed likely that law enforcement officers would consider sex crimes a current pressing issue and agree with sex offender laws as a manner to reduce sex crime rates (Finn, 1997; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012).

Some studies have assessed the experience and perception of criminal justice officials who implemented and enforced sex offender laws (Conley, Hill, Church, Stoeckel, & Allen, 2011; Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). One of the pioneering studies in criminal justice practitioners' perceptions of sex offender laws was conducted by Finn (1997). He interviewed 13 criminal justice officials from eight states including prosecutors, probation officers, law enforcement officers, and two experts. Most of the respondents stated community notification was "a useful management tool for supervising sex offenders" (p.16), but its implementation and enforcement was "time consuming and burdensome" (p. 10). Several of the criminal justice practitioners also reported community notification could be a good tool for educating the public about sex offenders. And, several of them pointed that law could interfere with sex offenders' ability to find and keep a place to live and employment. Gaines (2006) further studied the effects of SORN laws on law enforcement agencies by questioning 21 law enforcement officials who posted and maintained online public registries. They reported that community members were satisfied with the implementation and enforcement of those laws, whereas those laws were affecting sex offenders' ability to find and keep housing, employment, and supportive interpersonal relationships. Additionally, agencies expressed problems related with the lack of manpower and funding to implement, enforce, and maintain registry and community notification systems. The lack of uniformity regarding registration and notification procedures among law enforcement agencies may complicate generalizing those findings to all agencies (Gaines, 2006). Furthermore, Redlich (2001) conducted a study focusing on the effectiveness of community notification in preventing child sexual abuse. The sample was formed by 109 community members, 78 police officers, and 82 law students, who completed a battery of questionnaires. It

was found that police officers were the most likely to support community notification and believe that it was effective in preventing further victimization. Police officers believed child molesters and rapists could not be rehabilitated and did not think community notification violated sex offenders' rights. More than a third of the law enforcement officials in the sample stated all criminals should be subject to registration and community notification.

Other research focused on criminal justice officials' perceptions and attitudes toward sex offenders. Hogue (1993) surveyed sex offenders, psychologists, probation, correctional, and law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers expressed the most negative view of sex offenders, whereas probation officers, psychologists, and sex offenders who had more direct contact with this population held more positive opinions. Similarly, Lea and colleagues (1999) interviewed 23 professionals and paraprofessionals who worked with sex offenders including police officers, police officers who worked in a specialist child protection unit, psychologists, social workers, probation officers, and prison officers. They examined the criminal justice officials' perceptions of sex offenders and the manner in which such perceptions impacted their professional practice. Findings showed most participants hold stereotyping views of sex offenders, but police officers with less direct contact with sex offenders and without specialized training had the most stereotyped opinion of sex offenders. Professionals with extended specialized training and length of experience in working with sex offenders were more likely to reduce the impact of stereotyping in their professional practice. Another study by Conley et al. (2011) examined community correctional and probation officers' attitudes toward sex offenders. They electronically administered the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale. Community corrections workers expressed most sex offenders were dangerous but they could change their behavior with support and therapy. They did not consider sex offenders were

overly sexually active, nor prison sentences for sex offenses were significant longer than for other crimes.

Most recently, Mustaine and Tewksbury (2012) studied a diverse sample of criminal justice officials in regard to their attitudes toward sex offenders and their opinion about sex offender laws. The sample was formed by law enforcement officers, community corrections professionals, parole board members, and prison wardens. In general, the sample agreed SORN laws were effective in reducing future sexual offenses (38% law enforcement, 59% community corrections professionals, 62% parole board members, and 75% prison wardens). They also believed residency restriction policies were effective in decreasing further sexual victimization (71% law enforcement, 50% community corrections professionals, 44% parole board members, and 62% prison wardens). Additionally, at least a third of each subsample stated they would support such laws and policies even without empirical evidence supporting their efficacy in reducing sexual crimes. In 2015, Mustaine and colleagues further studied the perception of officials from the police, criminal courts, and corrections regarding sex offenders and sex offender laws, including SORN and residency restrictions laws. In general terms, all officials supported the implementation and enforcement of SORN and residency restrictions laws despite their doubts about the efficacy of such laws. Among them, law enforcement officers held the most negative and stereotyped view of sex offenders and supported punitive policies aimed at this population. They believed SORN and residency restrictions policies were fair and effective in protecting the public and reducing recidivism, even without supporting empirical evidence. It was also found that level of education was negatively correlated to stereotyping view of sex offenders and support of sex offender laws. The more educated and years of experience in the

criminal justice system, the less likely criminal justice officials were to hold a negative view of sex offenders and support SORN and residency restrictions laws.

In conclusion, research has found that compared to other professionals within the justice system including correctional officers, probation and parole officials, and treatment professionals, law enforcement officers held the most negative beliefs and attitudes about sex offenders. They did not believe these offenders could be rehabilitated and considered laws enacted against them to be effective (Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). Those perceptions were in line with sex offender laws' assumptions. In addition, law enforcement officers agreed community notification was an effective tool to supervise sex offenders (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Mustaine et al., 2015). They supported and considered SORN laws and residency restriction policies effective in reducing sex offender recidivism rates (Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). In general, law enforcement officers supported punitive sex offender policies (Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). Training law enforcement officers in the misconceptions and myths underlying sex offender laws, the unintended consequences of these laws, and in effectively working with sex offenders seems necessary to improve the criminal justice outcomes including solving cases, decreasing the recidivism rate, and, ultimately, reducing the number of victimizations.

### **Law Enforcement Training**

Research revealed that training may play a key role in the perpetuation or demise of sex offender myths. The more law enforcement officers were educated in empirical evidence about sex offenders, the more likely they might be to develop a more accurate view of these offenders and less negative attitudes (Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015). Similarly, they were more

aware of the negative consequences of residence restrictions and SORN laws, and less likely to believe that these policies were effective at reducing sex offender recidivism (Mustaine et al., 2015; Redlich, 2001). As a result, law enforcement officers who had received specialized training in sex offenders and sex offender laws might be more likely to use their discretion in favor of low risk sex offenders, especially when they were adolescent. For instance, Letourneau, Bandyopadhyay, Sinha, and Armstrong (2009) found that prosecutors who were familiar with the effects of sex offender registration laws on juveniles were less likely to present charges in order to protect juveniles from the stigma and long-term negative consequences of being registered as a sex offender.

Redlich (2001) also found that individuals with more knowledge were more likely to reject Megan's Law, believe that not all sex offenders should register, and think that sex offender laws violated offender's rights. Furthermore, law enforcement officers who received specialized training in the different types of sex offenders were more likely to interrogate suspected sex offenders more efficiently, increasing the probability of obtaining reliable evidence and avoiding false memories and false confessions (Read, Powell, Kebbel, & Milne, 2009). Apart from working more efficiently with sex offenders, individuals who received specialized training increased their knowledge and felt more confident working with sex offenders (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995; Taylor et al., 2003). A study by Hogue (1995) also found significant changes in professionals' attitudes toward sex offenders. After the specialized training, they expressed more positive attitudes toward that population of offenders and believed treatment could be successful to change sex offenders' behavior. Hence, exposure to sex offender empirical evidence influenced attitudes toward that population, made law enforcement officers' work more effective, and might reduce the criminogenic impact of the sex offender label (Ferguson &



Ireland, 2006). The motivation and experience of professionals working with a particular population as well as the length, nature, and content of training programs might mediate the impact of specialized training in professionals' attitudes toward offenders (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995).

The way training and socialization affected law enforcement official's attitudes and behavior, as well as the creation of laws based on misconceptions of the characteristics of a specific group of criminals could be understood under the theoretical framework of Howard S. Becker's labeling theory (1963). The following section explains Becker's theory (1963) in general terms. Becker did not apply his theory to the context of sex offenders, but this thesis considered it as a suitable theoretical framework. This thesis was not an attempt to test labeling theory, but it used Becker's labeling theory as its theoretical framework. How Becker's labeling theory may be applied to explain law enforcement's perceptions of sex offender myths and sex offender laws is addressed in next session as well.

### **Theoretical Framework: Labeling Theory**

Labeling theorists argued that social reaction was integral to the creation of deviance and crime (Becker, 1963). It was the society and mainly those who were in power positions who defined who were deviant. Howard S. Becker (1963) was one of the most influential labeling theory scholars who described the formation of labels and rules to control those who did not conform to social expectations. Becker (1963) posited that breaking a rule or committing a deviant act did not necessarily mean that an individual was going to be labeled as deviant. Depending on how others responded to an individual's act could determine whether the individual was labeled as deviant. For example, in the context of sexual offenses, if a father committed incest with his daughter but no one made a public accusation, he might not be labeled

as sex offender. Conversely, an individual could be labeled deviant without committing a deviant act (Becker, 1963). For instance, a 17-year-old male could be registered as a sex offender for having consensual sex with his 15-year-old girlfriend (Higgins, 2009). Becker (1963) also claimed that two individuals who committed the same infraction might be treated differently depending on who they were and their demographic features such as race, gender, or social class. Once individuals were labeled as outsiders they shared not only the label, but also the experience of being labeled (Becker, 1963). Thus, the reason why they were labeled or the behavior they committed lost its importance, and all of them were treated as a homogeneous group (Goffman, 1963). Hence, according to Becker (1963), whether an individual was labeled as deviant depended on the nature of the act he/she committed and also on the reaction of society to that particular act.

Furthermore, Becker (1963) explained the creation of the rules and their enforcement against certain types of individuals. First, a group of individuals, *moral crusaders*, made the infraction public, bringing it to the attention of others. They claimed the necessity of punishing the culprit, but to achieve their goal they had to rely on those in the upper levels of the social structure. Secondly, an entrepreneur, *moral entrepreneurs*, took the initiative of creating and enforcing the rules suggested by moral crusaders because they perceived some personal advantage in doing so. Rule creators proposed specific rules to control those who committed the infraction and profoundly disturbed them (Becker, 1963). As a result, laws reflected the interest of those enacting the rules, and they were likely to include features unintended by those citizens who asked for the rule against a particular group of offenders (Becker, 1963). After the creation of that new set of rules, according to Becker (1963), a new group of outsiders was also created. Becker asserted that outsiders were defined as permanent offenders who were unable to change

their behavior and the society reacted to them consequently, for example, stigmatizing outsiders, rejecting social support or formal control (Lilly et al., 2015). Nonetheless, labeling theorists observed that the meaning of the label “criminal” tended to be based on assumptions about lawbreakers that were wrong or only partially accurate (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; Scheff, 1966).

Additionally, labeling theory explained the criminal label was not only applied to the offender’s behavior but also to the individual, degrading the offender’s moral character (Garfinkel, 1956). The behavior was defined as wrong and the person was labeled as criminal, influencing the way others individuals reacted to the offender (Braithwaite, 1989). The offender became “one who was different from the rest of us, who could not or would not act as a moral human being and therefore might break other important rules” (Becker, 1963, p. 34). Consequently, being a criminal became the individual’s self-identity or master status (Becker, 1963). Other individuals ignored other offender’s social status and focused on the fact that they were interacting with a criminal. The emphasis on the criminal status might result in the offender’s internalization of his/her label, undermining conformity and pushing him/her to break the law. Thus, the labeling process led to social reaction that made conformity difficult, which could contribute to the development of criminal careers by those labeled “deviant” due to the impediments and lack of support to conform to the values of the mainstream society. That lack of conformity could, in turn, reinforce the label as criminal (Becker, 1963).

Furthermore, Becker (1963) and other labeling theorists claimed that labeling someone as criminal might not be only determined by his/her behavior but it could also be influenced by the individuals’ characteristics such as appearance, race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Chambliss, 1973; Steffensmeier & Terry, 1973; Turk, 1969). Therefore, labeling an individual

could be problematic because it might ignore that an innocent individual could be falsely accused and that criminals formed a heterogeneous group (Becker, 1963). As addressed above, Becker and other labeling theorists did not base or apply their theories to sex offenders; however, this theory considered labeling theory as its theoretical framework. The following section discusses the application of labeling to the creation of sex offender laws and sex offender myths.

### **Labeling Theory and Sex Offenders**

According to a labeling theory perspective, the origin of sex offender laws and the sex offender label arose from high profile cases often involving children. The media and particular motivated groups, *moral crusaders*, aroused legislators by claiming sex offenders were very dangerous and more punitive laws were necessary to protect the public. Consequently, those in power, politicians and legislators, *moral entrepreneurs*, enacted sex offender laws reinforcing the label of sex offender as monsters. This might be their way to respond to social reaction and maintain their position of power by showing that they cared about and wanted to protect the public (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). By enacting those laws, the state could control sex offenders who were causing moral panic and pacify public outrage. It also showed the moral crusaders that the state responded to their concern with new legislation to control and punish sex offenders, and protect children and the public. As a result, the public felt safe and rule creators were reelected and able to continue occupying their position of power (Becker, 1963; Sample & Kadleck, 2008). However, as Becker (1963) stated in his theory, labels tended to be based on wrong or only partially accurate information about particular criminals. As addressed previously, studies have shown sex offender laws were based on myths associated to that population, which created the label of sex offenders as uniquely threatening individuals, persistent in their behavioral patterns (Miehe et al., 2006; Sample & Bray, 2006, 2006), and who could not control their drive

to sexually offend (Groth, 1979) nor be rehabilitated (Feeley & Simon, 1992; Simon, 2000). That label was applied to the whole individual, not only to the behavior, which dehumanized sex offenders and legitimized the laws aimed at them (Banks, 2004). Being a sex offender became the individual's self-identity shaping his/her opportunities in terms of housing, employment, and social relationships. The difficulties sex offenders experienced in reintegrating into the society, in part due to the implementation of SORN and residency restrictions laws, might contribute to recidivism rather than fulfilling the purpose of such laws of protecting the public (Bruell et al., 2008; Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Levenson, 2008, 2010; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006).

Furthermore, the existence of the "sex offender label" created a stereotypical image that considered sex offenders as a homogeneous group of individuals (Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006). It might lead to two main concerns: 1) only those offenders who fitted into the "sex offender label" might be arrested and processed through the criminal justice system, and 2) an innocent suspect might be falsely labeled as sex offender because he might have similar features to the "typical" sexual criminal, independently of his/her behavior. For instance, myths assumed sex offenders were males; consequently, females may not be labeled as sex offenders and their cases may be less likely to be processed through the criminal justice system (Freeman & Sandler, 2008; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Hence, labeling may also impact law enforcement officers' perceptions and the way they implement and enforce laws. Becker's theory (1963) addressed how police forces were developed as a result of the enactment of new rules. He explained the creation of a new set of enforcement officials to enforce the rules against the outsiders in general terms. The next section describes Becker's concepts and the way they may be applied to explain law enforcement's perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender laws.

## **Labeling and Law Enforcement's Perceptions**

Becker (1963) explained that once a new set of rules was created, a new set of enforcement officials, *rule enforcers*, was also established. Rule enforcers were in charge of discovering, identifying, and applying the new rules to particular individuals who fitted in the new class of outsiders. Thus, the final result of the moral crusade was a police force (Becker, 1963). Becker stated rule enforcers had two main interests that shaped their activity: 1) they had to justify the existence of their position, and 2) they had to win the respect of those with whom they dealt (Becker, 1983). Enforcement officials might assume that it was their job to enforce the rules and they might not be concerned with the content of particular laws (Becker, 1983). By enforcing the rules, they justified their work and reinforced the existence of the laws, maintaining the label "outsiders" (Becker, 1963).

Therefore, the impact of sex offender laws might not only depend on their enactment but also on the extent to which law enforcement officers agreed with those policies and enforce them. Law enforcement officers might be likely to support and enforce the sex offender laws because they considered their implementation part of their job. As a way to justify their position, they might also assume sex crimes were a pressing issue and their job and enforcement of the laws were effective in reducing further sexual offenses. They might be likely to support the laws even without empirical evidence because they might consider their responsibility as implementing the laws rather than examining their content. Their support of such laws might contribute to the internalization of the sex offender label, which could affect the way they enforced the rules against those who committed sexual offenses. That stereotyping negative image of sex offenders might lead law enforcement officers to behave with suspects of sex offenses in a way that might directly or indirectly cause a confrontational interaction with these offenders which, in turn,

could make sex offenders more aggressive and unwilling to cooperate with the criminal justice system (Mustaine et al., 2015; Paternoster, Brame, Bachman, & Sherman, 1997; Sherman, 2000).

As addressed above, limited research has focused on the impact of the sex offender label and sex offender laws in law enforcement's perceptions. More research in law enforcement officers' knowledge and perceptions of sex offenders and the laws aimed at this population seems necessary. The following section addresses how the current study extended upon law enforcement's perceptions of sex offenders by examining sworn police officers' views of sex offenders and the fairness and efficacy of sex offender laws. Furthermore, this section discusses how this study fills a gap in the current literature by examining police officers' knowledge of sex offender myths and the unintended consequences of sex offender laws.

### **The Present Study**

This thesis was built on prior literature concerning criminal justice officials' perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender laws through examining the views of sworn police officers in a southeastern state. The present research intended to provide knowledge of sworn police officers' perceptions regarding sex offenders and the laws affecting that population, including registration, community notification (SORN), and residency restrictions. Unlike previous research in that area, the present thesis incorporated to what extent sworn police officers supported myths associated to sex offenders, and their knowledge of the unintended consequences of sex offender laws. Specifically, this study aimed the following objectives: a) To determine whether sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders were consistent with myths associated to that population of offenders; b) To examine whether there was a relationship between agreeing with sex offender myths and supporting sex offender laws; c) To provide data on police officers' support of sex offender registration, community notification, and residency restriction laws; d)

To determine whether law enforcement training in sex offenders affected sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders; and e) To analyze whether police officers' perceptions of sex offender was related to the amount of contact they had with that population.

To achieve those objectives, a 60 closed-ended question survey designed by the author was used. The survey was created by combining items from the *Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale* (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008), the *Attitudes Toward the Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO) scale* (Wnuk, Chapman, & Jeglic, 2006), series of items used in previous studies (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Mustaine et al., 2015; Redlich, 2001), and additional questions based on results and gaps in previous research (e.g. Conley et al., 2011; Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999). The survey included questions about sex offender myths, sex offender laws, police officers' experience in working with sex offenders, specialized training, and demographics. To date, limited research has examined sworn police officers' knowledge of sex offender myths and the unintended consequences of sex offender laws. This study will provide information in regard to the views of a southeastern sample of sworn police officers. The results of this study may assist in developing scientific-based specialized training in working with sex offenders for police officers. Additionally, the results of this study may inform about the training and knowledge of sworn police officers in a medium size state in the southeastern of the United States, as well as about the implementation and enforcement of sex offender laws in that area.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter will address the research method used in this study including the hypotheses, research design, definition of constructs and variables, description of the sample and sampling technique, and an analysis of threats to validity and the methods to overcoming these problems. This was a cross-sectional study that used a non-experimental design. A survey was created to collect self-report data from a sworn police sample with the purpose of describing their knowledge of sex offenders and laws, such as registration and community notification (SORN) and residency restrictions. Additionally, the survey collected information about police officers' training, experience with sex offenders, and demographics. First, the research question and objectives that led this study as well as the testable hypotheses proposed to answer them are addressed.

#### **Research Methods and Hypotheses**

The present research aimed to answer the research question: *How do law enforcement officers perceive sex offenders and sex offender laws?* This question was narrowed down to five objectives: a) To determine whether sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders were consistent with myths associated to that population of offenders; b) To examine whether there was a relationship between agreeing with sex offender myths and supporting sex offender laws; c) To provide data on police officers' support of sex offender registration, community notification, and residency restriction laws; d) To determine whether law enforcement training in sex offenders affected sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders; and e) To analyze whether police officers' perceptions of sex offender was related to the amount of contact they

had with that population. To achieve these objectives, and in line with previous research regarding law enforcement officers' perceptions toward sex offenders and the laws affecting this population, this study tested the following hypotheses: 1) The level of support of sex offender myths will be unevenly distributed within law enforcement; 2) Police officers who show higher level of support of sex offender myths are more likely to support sex offender laws; 3) Sworn police officers with more years worked in the criminal justice system are more likely to support and believe sex offender laws are fair and effective in reducing recidivism; 4) There is a relationship between law enforcement officer's training in working with sex offenders and their perception of sex offenders; and 5) The perception of police officers about sex offenders is related to the amount of contact they have with sex offenders.

*Hypothesis 1: Sworn police officers' perception of sex offender is consistent with sex offender myths.*

Based on previous research, police officers tend to hold the most negative attitudes toward sex offenders compared to other law enforcement officials such as correctional officers, prison wardens, probation and parole officials, and treatment professionals (Hogue, 1993; Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Redlich, 2001). The present study attempted to measure to what extent sworn police officers agreed with the myths associated to sex offenders (e.g. Evans et al., 2015; Feeley & Simon, 1992; Miethe et al., 2006; Sample, 2006; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006). No studies to date examine the perceptions of police officers in regard to sex offender myths. Because all police officers were trained and socialized in the criminal justice system in a similar way, it was expected that most police officers shared their opinion about sex offenders.

*Hypothesis 2: Sworn police officers who show higher level of support of sex offender myths are more likely to support sex offender laws.*

Sex offender laws are based, at least in part, on myths and misconceptions about this population (Jenkins, 1998; Levenson et al., 2007; Lilly et al., 2015; D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Samples & Bray, 2003; Zimring, 2004). Thus, it was expected that those who believed the myths associated with sex offenders were more likely to support sex offender laws.

*Hypothesis 3: Sworn police officers with more years of experience working in the criminal justice system are more likely to support sex offender laws and their effectiveness in reducing recidivism.*

As it was explained in the literature review and in line with labeling theory, enforcement officials may be likely to internalize the sex offender label and assume that the laws are effective in solving crimes without further questioning their content and empirical support (Becker, 1983; Finn, 1997; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012). It may be their way to justify their job and maintain their position (Becker, 1983). Thus, the longer police officers are socialized in the criminal justice system and their day-to-day experiences with police duties (Fielding & Fielding, 1991; Ortet-Fabrega & Perez, 1992) the more likely they may be to consider SORN laws and residency restriction policies fair and effective in reducing reoffending.

*Hypotheses 4: Sworn police officers who received specialized training in working with sex offenders are less likely to support sex offender myths.*

Previous studies analyzing the impact of training in working with sex offenders on law enforcement officials' attitudes toward sex offenders have shown specialized training improves individuals' attitudes toward sex offenders and increases their knowledge and confidence in working with this population (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1993, 1995; Lea et al., 1999; Taylor et al.,

2003). The present study suggested that there may be a relationship between receiving specialized training and knowledge of sex offender myths.

*Hypotheses 5: The perception of sworn police officers about sex offenders is related to the amount of contact they have with sex offenders.*

Research has shown that exposure to sex offenders influences attitudes toward this population by increasing knowledge (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Hogue, 1993; Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2003; Weekes et al., 1995). Thus, this study predicted that the level of experience in working with sex offenders police officers had would be related to their perceptions regarding myths of sex offenders. That is, their opinion about sex offenders might be skewed by their own experiences with this population.

Once the goals and hypotheses of this study have been detailed, the next section describes, defines, and operationalizes the constructs and variables that are part of the hypotheses. With the purpose of measuring these variables and examining the perceptions of law enforcement officers in regard to sex offenders, and their beliefs about the fairness, efficacy, and scope of laws affecting this population, including registration, community notification (SORN), and residency restrictions laws, a survey was designed by the author. The survey included questions in four areas: general information about sex offenders, sex offender laws, law enforcement officer's training, and demographics.

### **Research Design, Constructs, and Variables**

This research measured two dependent variables, perception of sex offender myths and perception of sex offender laws, and how they were affected by three independent variables: experience in working with sex offenders, specialized training received, and years worked in the criminal justice system. Specifically, the survey consisted of 60 closed-ended questions: 19 items

on sex offender myths, 22 items on sex offender laws, 7 questions about law enforcement officers' experience, 3 questions about specialized training, and 9 demographic variables (see full survey attached at the end of this paper). The survey was created by combining items from previously established scales and additional questions created by the author to obtain a more in depth knowledge and answer the present research questions. Specifically, the survey included four items from the *Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale* (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008), two items from *the Attitudes Toward the Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO) scale* (Wnuk, Chapman, & Jeglic, 2006), a series of items used in previous studies (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Mustaine et al., 2015; Redlich, 2001), and additional questions based on results and gaps in previous research cited in the literature review (e.g. Conley et al., 2011; Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999). These items were selected for their relevance for the purpose of this particular research. The items that did not come from previously established scales were developed on the basis of statements commonly encountered by the researchers regarding sex offender myths, sex offender laws, and the impact of training and experience on perceptions toward sex offenders. Next, each dependent and independent variable are operationalized, specifying the items in the survey and if they were selected from other scales or previous studies.

### **Dependent Variables**

- Perception of Sex Offender Myths

Myths were operationalized as morally transmitted beliefs that are not based on scientific evidence. Specifically, this study attempted to measure to what extent sworn police officers agreed to certain statements related to seven sex offender myth categories: sex offender recidivism, dangerousness, rehabilitation, sexual desire, female sex

offenders, victim profile, and offender-victim relationship. The myth scale consisted of 19 items related to knowledge of sex offenders and their victims. Three of these items were selected from the CATSO scale (items 2, 4, 8) and two from the ATTSO scale (items 11 and 17). The 19 indicators were measured using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, disagree = 3, and strongly disagree = 4). Participants who answered in line with myths associated to sex offenders received one point, whereas those showing scientifically-based knowledge received four points. Six items were recoded because they were expressed in the opposite direction, “strongly agree” in these items showed scientific knowledge about sex offender’s characteristics. Thus, participants’ responses to these items were recoded as following: strongly agree=4, agree = 3, disagree = 2, and strongly disagree = 1. These are items number 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, and 19. The value on “perception of sex offender myths” was calculated by adding together respondents’ answers to the 19 items in the myth scale. This measure had values ranging from 19 to 76, with lower values representing support for sex offender myths. The overall myth scale was internally consistent with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .786. In relation to the level of measurement, each item within the myth scale was ordinal, but the sum of the myth scale or scale value could be considered as an interval variable because lower values referred to less scientific knowledge of sex offenders and higher values equated to factual information. The following items compounded the myth scale:

- Sex offenders reoffend at much higher rates compared to other criminals (Item 1).
- Only a few sex offenders are dangerous (Item 2) (CATSO) \*.
- Sex offenders are more likely to be family members or acquaintances (Item 3) \*.
- With support and therapy someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior (Item 4) (CATSO)\*.
- Females can be sex offenders (Item 5) \*.
- Only females can be victims of sexual assault (Item 6).

- The vast majority of sex offenses are committed by strangers (Item 7).
  - Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity (Item 8) (CATSO).
  - Sex offenders cannot be rehabilitated (Item 9).
  - Sex offenders are the worst kind of offenders (Item 10).
  - Children can be sexual abused by a female (Item 11) (ATTSO)\*.
  - Children are the only victims who did nothing to instigate their sexual victimization (Item 12).
  - People who commit sex offenses want to have sex more often than the average person (Item 13).
  - Sex offenders are more dangerous than other types of criminals (Item 14).
  - Females who commit sex offenses are coerced by a male (e.g. their husband) (Item 15).
  - Males are not at risk of being victims of sexual crimes (Item 16).
  - Sex offenders should not be released back into the community (Item 17) (ATTSO).
  - Females sex offenders always act with another person, often a male (Item 18).
  - Males can be raped by females (Item 19) <sup>1</sup>.
- Perception of Sex Offender Laws

This dependent variable was operationalized as sworn police officers' perceptions about the fairness, effectiveness, and scope of sex offender Registration and Notification (SORN) laws and Residency Restriction policies. SORN laws required most sex offenders to register their addresses and personal information with local law enforcement agencies. (Sec. 113 & 114). Most of those required to register were also subject to community notification, wherein their information was released to the public (SMART, 2013). Additionally, residency restriction laws prohibited convicted sex offenders for living near to areas frequented by children including schools, parks, daycare centers, and school bus stops (Nieto & Jung, 2006). The purpose of these regulations was to promote public awareness and self-protection and potentially prevent victimizations (Lynch, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Denotes reverse coded.

Sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offender laws was measured using a sex offender law scale, which was formed by 20 questions concerning the degree to which they agreed with particular statements about sex offender laws. The scale was divided in two subscales including 11 items on SORN laws and 9 items on Residency Restriction policies (see below the specific items composing each subscale). One of the items, number 21, was selected from the CATSO scale; items 20 and 37 were derived from Finn's study (1997); seven items (28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34) were reworded to adapt them to a Likert scaling from questions used by Gaines (2006); four items (24, 26, 27, 38) were the same used by Mustaine et al. (2015); items 22 and 23 were used by Redlich (2001); and the rest of the statements were worded by the author.

The twenty questions were measured using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, disagree = 3, and strongly disagree = 4). A lower value corresponded to support of sex offender laws. Ten items were reverse coded and were recoded before calculating the total value in this scale. The value of each subscale was measured by adding together respondents' answers to the corresponding items. An alpha reliability test supported that both SORN ( $\alpha = .801$ ) and Residency Restrictions ( $\alpha = .584$ ) subscales were internally consistent. Similarly, the general value of "Perception of Sex Offender Laws" was calculated by adding together respondents' answers to the 20 items in the sex offender law scale. This measure had values ranging from 20 to 80, with lower values representing support for sex offender laws. The overall law scale was internally consistent with an alpha coefficient equal to .779. In relation to the level of measurement, each item within the sex offender law scale was ordinal. The sum of the sex offender law scale or scale value could be considered as an interval variable because lower values



equated to support of sex offender laws and higher values referred to less support of such laws. The following items compounded the sex offender law scale:

- A sex offender registry is a useful management tool for supervising sex offenders (Item 20; SORN subscale) (Finn, 1997).
- Sex offenders should wear tracking devices, so their location can be pinpointed at any time (Item 21; Residency Restrictions (RR) subscale) (CATSO).
- Sex offenders' rights are violated with the enactment of SORN laws (Item 22; SORN subscale) (Redlich, 2001) \*.
- Sex offenders' rights are violated with the enactment of residency restriction policies (Item 23; RR subscale) (Redlich, 2001) \*.
- I believe residency restrictions are effective in reducing the number of sex offenses (Item 24; RR subscale) (Mustaine et al., 2015).
- All sex offenders should be registered and obligated to undergo community notification regardless of their risk of recidivism and their opportunity for rehabilitation (Item 25; SORN subscale).
- I would support residency restrictions even if there is no scientific evidence to show they are effective (Item 26; RR subscale) (Mustaine et al., 2015).
- Registration and Community notification are effective in reducing the number of sex offenses (Item 27; SORN subscale) (Mustaine et al., 2015).
- Community notification laws negatively affect local residents' behaviors or attitudes toward sex offenders (Item 28; SORN subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- Registration and community notification (SORN) laws affect registered sex offenders' ability to find or keep a job (Item 29; SORN subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- Residency restriction policies affect registered sex offenders' ability to find or keep a job (Item 30; RR subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- Registration and community notification (SORN) laws interfere with any registered sex offenders' ability to find, and keep, a place to live (Item 31; SORN subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- Residency restriction policies interfere with any registered sex offenders' ability to find, and keep, a place to live (Item 32; RR subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- Registration and community notification (SORN) laws interfere with any registered sex offenders' relationships with family members (Item 33; SORN subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- Residency restriction policies interfere with any registered sex offenders' relationships with family members (Item 34; RR subscale) (Gaines, 2006) \*.
- SORN laws make citizens feel safer (Item 35; SORN subscale).
- Residency restriction policies make citizens feel safer (Item 36; RR subscale).
- Implementing and enforcing sex offender policies is burdensome and time consuming (Item 37; SORN subscale) (Finn, 1997) <sup>2</sup>.
- I believe registration and community notification laws in my community are fair (Item 38; SORN subscale) (Mustaine et al., 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> Denotes reverse coded.

- I believe residency restriction policies in my community are fair (Item 39; RR subscale).

The survey included two additional questions related to SORN laws asking police officers which criminals should be subject to registration and community notification:

- I believe the following offenders should be subject to community notification (select all that apply): no sex offenders, only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense, all sex offenders, other (please specify) (Item 40) (Mustaine et al., 2015).
- I believe the following criminals should be subject to registration (select all that apply): no criminals, all criminals, only criminals with high risk of re-offense, only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense, all sex offenders, murderers, all criminals, other (please specify) (Item 41).

In regard to the level of measurement, each answer category in question 40 was considered individually as a nominal variable with two levels: yes/selected (1) or not selected (0). Similarly, question 41 was nominal with eight answer categories: no criminals, all criminals, only criminals with high risk of re-offense, only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense, all sex offenders, murderers, all criminals, other. Since more than one answer could be selected, each answer category was individually coded as selected (1) or not selected (0). These two items were not included in the sex offender law scale as they used a different type of measurement. Frequencies and percentages of which offenders should be subject to registration and community notification according to sworn police officers will be reported in next chapter.

### **Independent Variables**

Four main independent variables were considered in the analyses including support of sex offender myths, experience in working with sex offenders, specialized training received, and years working in the criminal justice system. The level of support of sex offender myths was calculated by dichotomizing the myth scale value in high and low support using the midpoint

(47.5). As explained previously, this scale ranged from 19 to 76 with lower values represented support for sex offender myths and higher values meant empirical-based opinion. Therefore, high support of sex offender myths was defined as values between 19 and 47 in the myth scale, coded as 1; and low support of myths as values between 48 and 76, coded as 0.

The level of experience in working with sex offenders was operationalized as frequency of direct contact with sex offenders, usage of sex offender registry, and work in a special unit. Specifically, six questions were included: 1) *Use SORN when someone reports a sexual offense*; 2) *Participate in posting and maintaining registry and notification*; 3) *Have direct experience with sex offenders*; 4) *Work in a sex related offense case or crime*; 5) *Do you currently work in a sex offender special unit?* and 6) *Have you ever worked in a sex offender special unit?* A five-point Likert scale (ordinal level) was used in questions 1 to 4: Frequently= 3 (at least 1 a week), Occasionally (at least 2 a month) = 2, Rarely (once every 2-3 months) = 1, and Never = 0. Items 5 and 6 were yes or no questions (no = 0, yes = 1; nominal level). A total value of the experience scale was calculated by adding together respondents' answers to these six items. This measure had values ranging from 0 to 14, with higher values representing more experience in working with sex offenders. The alpha reliability test ( $\alpha = .707$ ) showed that the experience scale was internally consistent. In addition, training in working with sex offenders was measured by one dichotomic question (no = 0, yes = 1; nominal level): *Have you ever received any formal training in working with sex offenders?* The professional experience in the Criminal Justice system was measured as number of years working in this system, which was a ratio variable.

The present model also included demographic and background variables that may influence law enforcement officers' perceptions. The demographic variables were the same used by Mustaine et al. (2015). These measures were sex (male = 1, female = 2), race (White = 1,

Black = 2, Hispanic-Latino = 3, other = 4), marital status (single = 1, married = 2, divorced = 3, widowed = 4), level of education (graduate high school/GED = 1, some college = 2, college graduate = 3, post graduate = 4), age (years old), number of children, number of years working in the Criminal Justice system, number of years served as law enforcement officer, and political affiliation (seven-point Likert scale from very liberal = 1 to very conservative= 7). As Mustaine et al. (2015), some demographics were recoded due to the unevenly distribution of the responses: race (other = 0, White = 1), marital status (single = 0, non-single = 1), and level of education (non-college graduate = 0, college graduate = 1). In regard to the level of measurement, sex, race, marital status, and level of education were nominal variables; age and political affiliation were interval variables, and number of children, and number of years served as law enforcement officer were ratio variables. A summary with all the attributes of the variables and their codes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Attributes of the variables and codes.

VARIABLES		CODES
<b>Categorical variables</b>		
Sex	Male	1
	Female	2
Race	Other	0
	White	1
Marital Status	Single	0
	Non-single	1
Level of Education	Non-college graduate	0
	College graduate	1
<b>Scale variables</b>		
Age		
# Years working in the CJ system		
# Years served as law enforcement officer		

Table 1 (Continued)

# Children	Political Affiliation	Liberal-Conservative	1-7
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In relation to the practical and theoretical strengths and weaknesses of this type of research, surveys have the advantage of acquiring the collection of a large amount of data quickly and with minimal cost. It also allows for the collection of information about sensitive topics such as police officers’ opinion about offenders with whom they have to work and laws they must implement and enforce. However, the type of data obtained by self-report may be unreliable because individuals may provide socially acceptable responses. To minimize this problem in the current study, the survey was electronically administered. Participants were not asked to sign a written consent form nor to write any personal information in the survey. Before being allowed to take the survey, they consented by clicking “agree” rather than signing a document. All security features in the host website were enabled, which refrain from names, email, and IP addresses being collected. By assuring anonymity and eliminating personal contact between the researcher and the participants, it was expected that professionals involved in this study would feel able to answer the survey questions honestly without fear of being identified and compromising their employment status. Online surveys also provided privacy, convenience, and flexibility, which adapted better to police officer’s workday. Next section explains the procedure for selecting police officers to participate in this study.

### Sample

A total of 74 sworn police officers from a Southeastern state completed the survey. The sample was formed by 61 males (88.4%) and 8 females (11.6%), most of them White (96.9%), conservative ( $\bar{x} = 5$ ;  $S = 1.81$ ;  $n = 61$ ), married at some point in their lives (77.4%), and with an

average of one child ( $S = 1$ ;  $n = 60$ ). More than half of the respondents were college graduate or postgraduate (63.6%) with ages ranging from 22 to 65 years old ( $\bar{x} = 40$ ;  $S = 11.22$ ;  $n = 60$ ). The sample included sworn police officers ranging in experience from 42 to less than a year working as a law enforcement officer ( $\bar{x} = 15.49$ ;  $S = 10.87$ ;  $n = 71$ ) or in the criminal justice system ( $\bar{x} = 15.81$ ;  $S = 11.07$ ;  $n = 69$ ).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Research Sample.

<b>Sample Characteristics</b>	<b>n=74</b>	<b>Valid Percentage</b>
<b>Sex/Gender</b>		
Male	61	88.4%
Female	8	11.6%
<b>Race</b>		
White	62	96.9%
Other	2	3.1%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	14	22.6%
Non-single	48	77.4%
<b>Education</b>		
Non-college graduate	24	36.4%
College graduate	42	63.6%
		<b>Mean (Std. Dev)</b>
Age	60	40 (11.2)
# Years served as law enforcement officer	71	15.5 (10.9)
# Years working in the CJ system	69	15.8 (11.1)
# Children	60	1 (1)

Table 2 (Continued)

Political Affiliation	61	5 (1.8)
Liberal (1) – Conservative (7)		

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Participants were recruited using a non-probability sampling method. A convenience sample formed for sworn police officers willing and able to take the survey was used. Recruitment letters were emailed to five police chiefs of departments in the area. The letter outlined the proposed study, requested participation, and expressed the voluntariness and anonymity of all participants. Upon their acceptance to participate, the chief resent the email including the link to the online survey to law enforcement officers in the department. Following initial contact, two follow-ups were sent to the chief of each department. The survey was open for three months, from October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, to January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017.

Any police officer who expressed a desire to participate and met the inclusion/exclusion criteria was eligible for enrollment. Since the research goal focused on those officers who worked in the field and could have contact with offenders and victims, law enforcement personnel who were not sworn officers (secretarial, human resources, etc.) were excluded. Three methods were used to determine eligibility. Firstly, the recruitment letter specified participants must be sworn police officers. Secondly, the informed consent form also asserted that only sworn officers were eligible to participate in this research study. Thirdly, a question was included in the survey asking if the respondent was a sworn officer. The next section explains the different methods and analyses conducted to test the five presented hypotheses.

## Methods and Analysis

The methodology employed in this study relied on the use of a 60 closed-ended question survey. The survey included questions about sex offender myths, sex offender laws, police officers' experience in working with sex offenders, specialized training, and demographics. Analysis was conducted through the use of SPSS software. The following sections address the methods and analysis utilized in this thesis.

### Data Cleaning

After collecting the data, it was manually examined for missing information. These omissions were coded as missing and removed from the data. Consequently, the total number of responses was reduced in some questions and scale scores. The missing data was not systematic; thus, the total number of responses varies for each particular question. The sample size (n) for each analysis will be specified in each result in the following section.

### Analysis

The data was exported into SPSS for statistical analyses purposes. To test the first hypothesis, *sworn police officers' perception of sex offender is consistent with sex offender myths*, the frequency distribution of the myth scale was examined. The myth scale was divided in low and high support using the midpoint. High support for myths ranged from 19 to 47 and low support from 48 to 76. Descriptive statistics including the mean, median, standard deviation, and skewness were also calculated. To further examine the distribution of sworn police officers' perception of sex offender, an item by item analysis was conducted and the percentage of police officers supporting each statement was reported. For the second hypothesis, *sworn police officers who show higher level of support of sex offender myths are more likely to support sex offender laws*, an independent samples T-test and multiple regression analyses were conducted.



Additionally, the frequency distribution and an item by item analysis of the law scale were examined. The percentage of police officers supporting each statement regarding sex offender laws was reported. Further analyses were conducted to examine police officers' opinion about which offenders should be subject to registration and community notification.

To test the third hypothesis, *sworn police officers with more years of experience working in the criminal justice system are more likely to support sex offender laws and their effectiveness in reducing recidivism*, multiple regression analysis was conducted. Independent samples T-test analysis was also run by dichotomizing the variable "years working in the criminal justice system" using the Median (17) as the cutoff point. Sworn police officers with 17 or fewer years of experience working in the criminal justice system were considered to have low experience, and those with more than 17 years were labeled as high experience. For the fourth hypothesis, *sworn police officers who received specialized training in working with sex offenders are less likely to support sex offender myths*, an independent samples t-test was conducted using the dichotomy variable "specialized training" as the independent variable and the scale variable "myth scale" as the dependent variable. The last hypothesis, *the perception of sworn police officers about sex offenders is related to the amount of contact they have with sex offenders*, was tested using correlation and multiple regression analyses. The demographics (number of years working in the criminal justice system, age, and level of education) were included as control variables in the multiple regression analyses. Finally, the last section of this chapter covers the threats to validity due to the research design and sampling technique used and the methods for overcoming these problems, as well as the limitations of this study.

## **Validity and Limitations**

The main threat to external validity was the sampling technique or selection biases. A convenience sample instead of a random sample was used, thus, the representativeness of the sample could not be assured. The data utilized to examine police officers' perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender laws was collected from a small area in a Southeastern state. Hence, it could not be assumed that the sample was representative of all police officers in the state or national level, and the author was cautious when drawing conclusions from this research. A larger random national sample would be required to generalize the results to all police officers across the U.S. However, that was beyond the scope and resources available for this particular study. Additionally, the data set was affected by missing data due to human error when completing the questionnaire or unwillingness to answer particular questions. Consequently, some individuals had to be eliminated from the study. During the presentation of the results in the next chapter, the number of respondents considered for each analysis will be specified.

In relation to the survey validity, all items had face validity because they were selected and designed in line to the purpose of this research. Furthermore, the survey was expected to have construct and content validity since most items were selected from previous studies and scales that have been proved valid. All ranges of the concepts (types of myths, SORN and Residential Restrictions laws, experience, and training) were considered in this research, and multiple indicators of the same concept were included. Alpha reliability tests were conducted for each scale and confirmed that the survey was internally consistent.

Furthermore, there could be an internal threat to validity called testing, which referred to the fact that participants might be aware of the purpose of the research and might adapt their responses to meet the researcher's expectations. As addressed previously, anonymity was

assured to avoid socially acceptable responses and facilitate honest responses. The survey was electronically administered to eliminate personal contact between the researcher and participants, a signed consent form was waived, and no additional personal information was collected. Thus, it was impossible to connect the answer to a specific individual. No other threats to internal validity were present. During the data collection, no historical events related to the research topic, which could confound the study results, took place. As a cross-sectional study, there were no threats of maturation nor experimental mortality. The confidence in the validity and generalizability of this research findings could be further strengthened by replicating this study using the same survey. If future research seems to confirm the hypotheses, the weight of evidence provides support for the validity of the measure.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter will present the findings of this thesis. The purpose of this study was to examine law enforcement officers' perceptions about sex offenders and their opinion about the effectiveness, scope, and fairness of sex offender laws. To answer the research question, *How do law enforcement officers perceive sex offenders and sex offender laws?* five testable hypotheses were proposed: 1) The level of support of sex offender myths will be unevenly distributed within law enforcement; 2) Police officers who show higher level of support of sex offender myths are more likely to support sex offender laws; 3) Sworn police officers with more years worked in the criminal justice system are more likely to support and believe sex offender laws are fair and effective in reducing recidivism; 4) There is a relationship between law enforcement officer's training in working with sex offenders and their perception of sex offenders; and 5) The perception of police officers about sex offenders is related to the amount of contact they have with sex offenders. The following section, which is organized by hypotheses, discusses the statistical analyses conducted and reports the results. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to reject the null hypothesis.

#### **Hypothesis 1**

The first hypothesis was: *Sworn police officers' perception of sex offender is consistent with sex offender myths.* A frequency distribution was conducted to examine how similar sworn police officers' opinions about sex offenders are. It showed to what extent sworn police officers agreed with the myths associated to sex offenders. As addressed previously, the score on "perception of sex offender myths" ranged from 19 to 76, with lower values representing support

for sex offender myths and high values showing scientific knowledge of sex offenders' characteristics. Using the midpoint, high support for myths ranged from 19 to 47 and low support from 48 to 76. Ninety-two percent of the participants showed a mostly scientific based opinion about sex offenders with scores ranging from 48 to 63; whereas 8 percent of them expressed an opinion in line with sex offender myths, with values ranging from 41 to 47. Thus, most sworn police officers fell above 48, which meant they had some empirical based knowledge about sex offenders' characteristics. In other words, the "perception of sex offender" distribution is negatively skewed ( $\bar{x} = 54.31$ ; Median = 55.00;  $n = 62$ ).

An in-depth item-by-item analysis was also conducted to examine the percentage of sworn police officers who agreed with each individual statement in the myth scale. In general, the sample responded to the items in line with scientific evidence. Among the sworn police officers in the sample, 97.3 percent ( $n = 73$ ) stated the majority of sexual offenses were not committed by strangers, and 87.7 percent ( $n = 73$ ) knew sex offenders were more likely to be family members or acquaintances. They were aware that female could also commit sex offenses (94.6%;  $n = 73$ ) and act independently without a partner (97.3%;  $n = 73$ ) or coerced by a male (97.3%;  $n = 73$ ). Females sex offenders might victimize other females, males (93.2%;  $n = 74$ ), or children (93.2%;  $n = 73$ ). Sworn police officers expressed that not only children (80.0%;  $n = 70$ ) and females (97.3%;  $n = 73$ ) but also males could be at risk of sexual victimization (93.2%;  $n = 74$ ). Additionally, despite the nature of these crimes, sworn police officers agreed individuals who committed sex offenses did not have higher rates of sexual desire (76.1%;  $n = 71$ ) or sexual activity (64.7%;  $n = 68$ ). There were only few sex offender myths that were mostly supported by the police officers in the sample. They believed most sex offenders were dangerous (79.2%;  $n = 72$ ) and reoffended at much higher rates compared to other criminals (71.8%;  $n = 71$ ). Some

inconsistencies were found in the responses of sworn police officers to some statements. A little more than half of the sample (54.9%; n = 71) stated sex offenders were not more dangerous than other types of criminals; however, 64.8 percent (n = 71) agreed sex offenders were the worst kind of offenders (64.8%; n = 71). Similarly, most than half of the sworn police officers in the sample believed sex offenders could be rehabilitated (58.6%; n = 70) and released back into the community (60.6%; n = 71); but 55.6 percent (n = 72) did not think individuals who committed a sexual offense could learn to change their behavior (Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage of police officers who believed each sex offender myths

<b>Myths</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Sex offenders reoffend at much higher rates compared to other criminals	51(71)	71.8%
Not only a few sex offenders are dangerous	57(72)	79.2%
Sex offenders are the worst kind of offenders	46(71)	64.8%
Even with support and therapy someone who committed a sexual offense cannot learn to change their behavior	40(72)	55.6%
<b>Scientific Evidence</b>		
Sex offenders are more likely to be family members or acquaintances	64(73)	87.7%
The vast majority of sexual offenses are not committed by strangers	71(73)	97.3%
Females can be sex offenders	69(73)	94.6%
Females who commit sex offenses are not coerced by a male (e.g. their husband)	71(73)	97.3%
Females sex offenders do not always act with another person often a male	71(73)	97.3%
Male can be raped by females	69(74)	93.2%
Children can be sexual abused by a female	68(73)	93.2%
Not only females can be victims of sexual assault	71(73)	97.3%

Table 3 (Continued)

Males are at risk of being victims of sexual crimes	69(74)	93.2%
Children are not the only victims who did nothing to instigate their sexual victimization	56(70)	80.0%
Sex offenders are not more dangerous than other types of criminals	39(71)	54.9%
Sex offenders can be rehabilitated	41(70)	58.6%
Sex offenders should be released back into the community	43(71)	60.6%
People who commit sex offenses do not want to have sex more often than the average person	54(71)	76.1%
Sex offenders do not have high rates of sexual activity	44(68)	64.7%

## Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis was: *Sworn police officers who show higher level of support of sex offender myths are more likely to support sex offender laws.* Independent samples T-Test and multiple regression analyses were used to examine the relationship between myth support and law support; however, after inspecting the frequency distribution of the law scale, it was found that 90.4 percent of the participants supported laws with scores ranging from 20 to 50 (minimum possible score and midpoint of this scale, respectively) ( $\bar{x} = 44.33$ ;  $S = 5.02$ ;  $n = 52$ ). Thus, independently of their support or not for sex offender myths, sworn police officers were likely to believe that sex offender laws were fair and effective. This conclusion was supported by the large standard error found in the T-test ( $\bar{x} = 46.00$ ;  $S = 9.06$ ;  $t = .478$ ;  $df = 3.15$ ;  $p > .05$ ) and multiple regression ( $B = 41.817$ ; Std. Error = 10.956) analyses, which made impossible to determine the relationship between level of support of sex offender myths and support of sex offender laws in this study.

An in-depth item-by-item analysis was conducted to examine the percentage of sworn police officers who agreed with each individual statement in the law scale. In general, the sample was unaware of the unintended consequences of SORN and residency restrictions policies and believed these laws were effective in reducing recidivism (Table 4). More than half of the sworn police officers in the sample (53.6%; n = 56) believed residency restrictions policies did not interfere with any registered sex offender's ability to find, and keep, a place to live. Additionally, most of them believed SORN (65.2%; n = 69) and residency restrictions (67.3%; n = 55) laws did not interfere with any registered sex offender's relationships with family members. Among the sworn police officers in the sample, 62.9 percent (n = 70) and 70.8 percent (n = 72) stated SORN laws and residency restrictions, respectively, were effective in reducing the number of sex offenses. Furthermore, most sworn police officers (93.1%; n = 72) agreed the sex offender registry was a useful management tool for supervising sex offenders, and believed all sex offenders should be obligated to wear tracking devices (62.5%; n = 72), register, and undergo community notification regardless of their risk of recidivism and their opportunity for rehabilitation (65.3%; n = 72). They stated SORN and residency restrictions laws did not violate sex offenders' rights (93%, n = 71; 98.2%, n = 57), were fair (91.3%, n = 69; 94.6%, n = 56), and made citizens feel safer (83.1%, n = 71; 87.9%, n = 58). In addition, they thought implementing and enforcing sex offender policies were not burdensome nor time consuming (58.3%; n = 72). The only two statements police officers answered in line with scientific evidence were that SORN laws (65.7%; n = 70) and residency restrictions affected registered sex offenders' ability to find or keep a job (54.4%; n = 57); however, most sworn police officers stated they would support residency restrictions even if there was no scientific evidence to show they were effective (71.2%; n = 73). Finally, no agreement was found among sworn police officers



regarding whether SORN laws interfered with any registered sex offender’s ability to find, and keep, a place to live (50% agreed; 50% disagreed; n = 70) or whether community notification law negatively affected local residents’ behavior or attitudes toward sex offenders (49.3% agreed; 50.7% disagree; n = 69).

Table 4. Percentage of police officers who agreed with each statement in the law scale

<b>Scientific Evidence</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
SORN laws affect registered sex offenders’ ability to find or keep a job	46(70)	65.7%
Residency Restrictions affect registered sex offenders’ ability to find or keep a job	31(57)	54.4%
<b>Support Sex Offender Laws</b>		
Sex offender registry is a useful management tool for supervising sex offenders	67(72)	93.1%
Sex offenders should wear tracking devices, so their location can be pinpointed at any time	45(72)	62.5%
Sex offenders’ rights are not violated with the enactment of SORN	66(71)	93.0%
Sex offenders’ rights are not violated with the enactment of Residency Restrictions	56(57)	98.2%
Residency restrictions are effective in reducing the number of sex offenses	51(72)	70.8%
SORN laws are effective in reducing the number of sex offenses	44(70)	62.9%
All sex offenders should be registered and obligated to undergo community notification regardless of their risk of recidivism and their opportunity for rehabilitation	47(72)	65.3%
They would support residency restrictions even if there is no scientific evidence to show they are effective	52(73)	71.2%
Residency restrictions do not interfere with any registered sex offenders’ ability to find, and keep, a place to live	30(56)	53.6%

Table 4 (Continued)

SORN laws do not interfere with any registered sex offenders' relationships with family members	45(69)	65.2%
Residency Restrictions do not interfere with any registered sex offenders' relationships with family members	37(55)	67.3%
SORN laws make citizens feel safer	59(71)	83.1%
Residency Restrictions make citizens feel safer	51(58)	87.9%
SORN laws in my community are fair	63(69)	91.3%
Residency Restrictions in my community are fair	53(56)	94.6%
Implementing and enforcing SO policies is not burdensome and time consuming	42(72)	58.3%

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Further analyses were conducted to examine police officers' opinion about which offenders should be subject to registration and community notification. Questions 40 and 41 of the survey were considered in these analyses: *I believe the following offenders should be subject to community notification (select all that apply): no sex offenders, only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense, all sex offenders, other (please specify)* (Item 40) (Mustaine et al., 2015), and *I believe the following criminals should be subject to registration (select all that apply): no criminals, all criminals, only criminals with high risk of re-offense, only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense, all sex offenders, murderers, all criminals, other (please specify)* (Item 41). None of the sworn police officers considered that no sex offenders should be subject to SORN regulations. Approximately, 70 percent and 32 percent of them agreed all sex offenders or only sex offenders with high risk of reoffending, respectively, should be subject to community notification. In regard to registration, 66.2 percent of police officers believed all sex offenders should be subject to registration. Around 24 percent of the officers stated that only sex offenders with high risk of recidivism should be registered. Additionally, 63.5 percent of them

agreed murderers should also be registered. Among police officers, 27.4 percent stated criminals with high risk of reoffending should be subject to registration, and only 10.8 percent responded that all criminals should be registered (Table 5).

Table 5. Percentage of police officers who believed the following offenders should be subject to SORN regulations

<b>Community Notification</b>	<b>Frequency (n = 74)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
No Sex Offenders	0	0%
High Risk Sex Offenders	24	32.4%
All sex Offenders	52	70.3%
Other	6	8.1%
<b>Registration</b>		
No Criminals	0	0%
High Risk Criminals	20	27.4%
High Risk Sex Offenders	18	24.3%
All Sex Offenders	49	66.2%
Murderers	47	63.5%
All Criminals	8	10.8%
Other	7	9.5%

### **Hypothesis 3**

The third hypothesis was: *Sworn police officers with more years of experience working in the criminal justice system are more likely to support sex offender laws and their effectiveness in reducing recidivism.* Independent samples T-test and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between support of sex offender laws and years working in the criminal justice system. For the T-test, the variable “years working in the criminal justice

system” was dichotomized using the Median (17) as the cutoff point. Thus, those with fewer than or 17 years of experience in the criminal justice (CJ) system were labeled as low CJ experience, and those with more than 17 years of experience as high CJ experience. It was found that those with more years worked in the criminal justice system were more likely to support laws ( $\bar{x} = 44.91$ ;  $S = 5.70$ ) than those with less CJ experience ( $\bar{x} = 43.96$ ;  $S = 4.16$ ); however, this difference was not statistically significant ( $t = -.671$ ;  $df = 47$ ;  $p > .05$ ). The regression analyses corroborated the results from the T-test that the number of years working in the criminal justice system was not a good predictor of support for sex offender laws ( $t = -.435$ ;  $p > .05$ ). As addressed in hypothesis 2, in general, police officers (90.4%) were likely to support sex offender laws.

#### **Hypothesis 4**

The fourth hypothesis was: *Sworn police officers who received specialized training in working with sex offenders are less likely to support sex offender myths.* An independent samples T-test was conducted to examine the differences in supporting sex offender myths between those police officers who received specialized training in working with sex offenders and those who did not receive it. No statistically significant differences ( $t = -.001$ ;  $df = 59$ ;  $p > .05$ ) were found in relation to sworn police officers’ view of sex offenders between those who received formal training in working with sex offenders ( $\bar{x} = 54.39$ ;  $S = 4.68$ ;  $n = 33$ ) and those without specialized training ( $\bar{x} = 54.39$ ;  $S = 5.10$ ;  $n=28$ ).

#### **Hypothesis 5**

The last hypothesis was: *The perception of sworn police officers about sex offenders is related to the amount of contact they have with sex offenders.* In this case, correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between the myth scale

and the experience scale, which included the frequency of direct contact with sex offenders, usage of a sex offender registry, and work in a special unit. A weak negative correlation was found between these two variables, meaning that the more contact police officers had with sex offenders, the more likely they were to support sex offender myths; however, that relationship was not statistically significant ( $r = -.042$ ;  $p > .05$ ). In relation to the multiple regression analysis, four continuous independent variables were included: experience scale, number of years working in the criminal justice system, age, and level of education. The results showed that the independent variables were not regressed on the dependent variable (myth scale) (Table 6). The overall model was not statistically significant ( $F=.859$ ;  $p > .05$ ).

Table 6. Hypothesis 5: Multiple Regression Analysis.

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
(Constant)	50.076	5.840		8.575	.000
Level of Education	1.703	.941	.275	1.810	.077
Age	.017	.188	.038	.088	.930
Experience Scale	-.020	.262	-.012	-.077	.939
# Years working in the CJ System	-.007	.194	-.015	-.034	.973

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the results in the current study. The results indicated most sworn police officers in the sample had some empirical based knowledge of sex offenders' characteristics, but they were mostly unaware of the unintended consequences of sex offender laws. Independently of their knowledge about this population and the laws, sworn police officers were likely to support sex offender laws and believe they were effective in reducing sex offenses.

Additionally, police officers with more years worked in the criminal justice system were more likely to support sex offender myths and laws; however, these relationships were not statistically significant. No effects of specialized training and contact with sex offenders in sworn police officers' perceptions of this population were found. The next chapter provides a more in-depth discussion of these findings, future research, and policy implications.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis was an attempt to examine how sworn police officers perceived sex offenders and sex offender laws by focusing on five hypotheses. First, it was examined whether sworn police officers' perception of sex offenders was consistent with sex offender myths. That allowed to assess whether sworn police officers as a group had a similar view of sex offenders and if that opinion was based on sex offender myths or empirical evidence. Second, it was examined whether there was a relationship between believing sex offender myths and supporting sex offender laws. Previous studies have stated that the laws and policies enacted to control sex offenders were based on misconceptions about this population (Jenkins, 1998; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Samples & Bray, 2003; Zimring, 2004), but no studies to date have examined the perceptions of police officers in regard to sex offender myths and whether that knowledge related to supporting the laws. Third, it was assessed whether sworn police officers with more years of experience working in the criminal justice system were more likely to support sex offender laws. That allowed to explore whether day-to-day experiences with police duties and socialization in the criminal justice system may have an impact on police officer's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of sex offender laws in reducing recidivism. Fourth, it was examined whether sworn police officers who received specialized training in working with sex offenders were less likely to support sex offender myths. Previous research has shown specialized training improved individuals' attitudes toward sex offenders, and increased their knowledge and confidence in working with this population (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1993, 1995; Lea et al., 1999; Taylor, Keddie, & Lee, 2003). This particular research studied whether

specialized training increased empirical based knowledge of sex offenders' characteristics. Fifth, it was assessed whether the perception of sworn police officers about sex offenders was related to the amount of contact they had with sex offenders. Research has shown correctional officers, probation and parole officials, and treatment professionals tended to have more positive beliefs and attitudes toward sex offenders than law enforcement (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). This study tested whether the frequency of direct contact with sex offenders, usage of sex offender registry, and work in a special unit increased sworn police officers' knowledge of sex offenders.

To test those hypotheses, self-report data from a sworn police sample collected through a 60 closed-ended question survey was used. The survey included questions about sex offender myths, sex offender laws, police officers' experience in working with sex offenders, specialized training, and demographics. Diverse statistical analyses including independent samples T-test, correlations, and multiple regression were conducted to describe sworn police officers' knowledge of sex offenders and laws such as registration, community notification (SORN), and residency restrictions. The results of this exploratory study extended current knowledge regarding law enforcement's perceptions of sex offenders by examining an under-researched topic: sworn police officers' views of sex offenders and the fairness and efficacy of sex offender laws. In this chapter, the overall findings of the current research, future research, and policy implications associated with sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender laws are addressed.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Hypothesis one examined whether sworn police officers' perception of sex offender was consistent with sex offender myths. A frequency distribution and an in-depth item-by-item



analysis were conducted to analyze police officers' knowledge of sex offenders' characteristics and the sex offender myths they supported. The results revealed that sworn police officers as a group had a similar opinion about sex offenders, which was mostly based on empirical evidence. They seemed to be aware of the descriptive characteristic of sex offenders. They agreed sex offenders could be males or females who acted individually or with a partner and victimized children, females, or males. Police officers also knew sex offenders were more likely to be family members or acquaintances and, despite the nature of their crimes, they did not have higher rates of sexual desire or sexual activity than the average person. When questions focused on safety and recidivism rates police officers' opinions were, however, inconsistent or based on sex offender myths. Contrary to empirical evidence (Bartosh, Garby, Lewis & Gray, 2003; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; U.S. Department of Justice, 2011), sworn police officers believed most sex offenders reoffended at much higher rates compared to other criminals. Sworn police officers' opinion was divided in relation to whether sex offenders could change their behavior. Approximately half of the sample agreed sex offenders could be rehabilitated and released back into the community, whereas the other half disagreed sex offender could learn to change their behavior. This inconsistency may be explained by the officers' subjective definition to the term "sex offender" and the lack of specification of the types of sex offenders. They might believe some sex offender, such as rapists and pedophiles, were permanent, but others such as exhibitionists could be rehabilitated. This limitation will be further explained in the next section.

In general, these findings supported previous research, which found law enforcement did not believe sex offenders could be rehabilitated (Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). The current study provided further information untouched by researchers about the scientific knowledge sworn police officers

possessed about sex offenders' traits. All sworn police officers were socialized similarly in the criminal justice system and had similar training and experiences; thus, it was expected that they shared their opinion about sex offenders. Furthermore, their limited impersonal interactions with sex offenders may explain why sworn police officers knew the general characteristics of sex offenders but not their recidivism rates and potential for rehabilitation. As the front line of social control, sworn police officers may interact with sex offenders when a victim reports a sexual offense, and they investigate and arrest the suspect. They get to know the details of the sexual offense and the suffering of the victims. Sexual offenses are considered socially more unacceptable and abhorrent than other actions; thus, sworn police officers may be likely to be influenced by sociocultural representations of sex offenders, dehumanize these individuals, and assume the sex offender label as individuals who are dangerous, persistent in their behavior, and unable to be rehabilitated. In these circumstances, police officers may be likely to see these individuals as cases, focus on the deviant actions, and ignore other internal characteristics or external factors that might have contributed to the commission of the sexual offense. In addition, sworn police officers may not have contact with convicted sex offenders who reintegrate into society and stop victimizing. They may only know about those who fail during their supervision period or reoffend after their release from prison; therefore, that may reinforce their view of high sex offender recidivism rates. Likewise, if police officers were informed that these individuals reoffended, they might assume they committed another sexual offense, whereas the literature stated they tended to be more likely to commit a non-sexual new offense (Hanson, 2000; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Miethe et al., 2006; Ragusa-Salerno, Ostermann & Thomas, 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Additionally, it is well-known that sex crimes are highly underreported, which tends to be a

limitation of the studies trying to measure sex offender recidivism rates. It might be that sworn police officers in this study participated in more sexual cases and saw further victimization after arrest, but perhaps by reasons of discretion or resources, those cases were not formally reported and could not be included in research. To clarify that hypothetical explanation, further examination of sex offender recidivism rates in collaboration with the police departments in that particular medium size southeastern state would be needed.

The second hypothesis for this study examined whether sworn police officers who showed higher level of support of sex offender myths were more likely to support sex offender laws. No results could be reported to answer that research question because most sworn police officers in the sample had a mostly scientific based opinion about sex offenders and supported sex offender laws. Hence, independently of their support or not for sex offender myths, sworn police officers were likely to believe that sex offender laws were fair and effective. A frequency distribution and an in-depth item-by-item analysis were conducted to analyze sworn police officers' support and knowledge of sex offender registration, notification (SORN), and residency restrictions policies. In general terms, sworn police officers seemed not to be familiar with the unintended consequences of sex offender laws reported by some researchers (Bruell et al., 2008; Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Levenson, 2008, 2010; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006). More than half of the police officers only agreed that SORN and residency restrictions affected registered sex offenders' ability to find or keep a job. Most of them did not consider these polices may interfere with any registered sex offenders' ability to find, and keep, a place to live, or to maintain relationships with family members. Sworn police officers may know about the difficulties of sex offenders to find and keep a job because it is a common problem of most ex-convicted; however, the other two unintended consequences may

be unique for sex offenders due to the laws enacted to control them. The lack of follow-ups and problems with monitoring and supervision of sex offenders, at least in part due to the lack of resources, manpower, and outdated registry information (Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky, & Levenson, 2016), may make it difficult for police officers to know sex offenders' experiences and hindrances after release from prison.

Moreover, sworn police officers supported the sex offender registry as a useful management tool for supervising sex offenders. They agreed SORN and residency restrictions were fair, did not violate sex offenders' rights, and made citizens feel safer. Contrary to empirical evidence (Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Sandler et al., 2008), they believed SORN and residency restrictions were effective in reducing the number of sex offenses. These findings were consistent with previous research in law enforcement's perceptions of sex offender laws, which showed police officers were likely to support laws enacted to control sex offenders (Finn, 1997; Gaines, 2006; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). Furthermore, more than half of the police officers stated all sex offenders should be registered and obligated to undergo community notification regardless of their risk of recidivism and their opportunity for rehabilitation. They also expressed they would support residency restrictions even if there was no scientific evidence to show their effectiveness. These findings were equivalent to those found by Mustaine et al. (2015).

The limited contact with sex offenders, the intimate contact with victims, and their opinion of sex offenders as dangerous and prone to reoffend may explain sworn police officers' support for sex offender laws since these laws favor the rights of community members over the rights of convicted sex offenders (Redlich, 2001). Their job responsibilities are to protect the public and enforce the rules, and they may be likely to believe that their actions are effective in

inhibiting additional sexual victimization which, in turn, may justify their support for punitive laws against sex offenders. They may also want to express that they are “tough on crime,” and showing an optimistic view of this population by not supporting the laws may be perceived as negative, even as a weakness, in the culture and context of policing. This unconditional support of sex offender laws may be explained by labeling theory. According to a labeling perspective, sworn police officers’ role in facilitating public safety and enforcing sex offender laws, and the current attention to these laws and sex crimes in general, may make law enforcement officers to feel more pressured to enforce these rules without questioning the content of the laws. They may consider analyzing the content of the laws as being beyond their scope, and implementing such as laws as their role despite the unfairness or unintended consequences these laws may have. Enforcing sex offender laws is part of their job, and they may be more likely to believe that they are contributing effectively in reducing crime rates and, in turn, that sex offender laws are fulfilling their purpose of crime control and public safety. Additionally, consistent with previous research that analyzed the impact of demographics in views of sex offenders and support of sex offender laws (Mustaine et al., 2015), the fact that the sample was mainly formed by white conservative males from a southern state may explain the results obtained in this study.

The third hypothesis examined whether sworn police officers with more years of experience working in the criminal justice system were more likely to support sex offender laws. To answer that research question, independent samples T-test and multiple regression analyses were conducted. The results of those analyses revealed that those with more years worked in the criminal justice system were slightly more likely to support laws. As addressed previously, this finding may be explained by their longer socialization in the criminal justice system and internalization of their responsibility of enforcing the laws despite the consequences it may have.

In general, sworn police officers independently of the number of years served in the justice system were likely to support sex offender laws. Additionally, the longer police officers served in the criminal justice system, the more contact they had with victims, which may make them more sensitive to the consequences of sexual victimization. Weekes et al. (1995) reported that officers with more years supervising sex offenders expressed more stress. Similarly, Craig (2005) found that older supervisors of sex offenders reported concern in regard to their interactions with sexual offenders. These feelings could impact their attitudes toward sex offenders and increase their support for punitive laws against this population.

The fourth hypothesis in this study examined whether sworn police officers who received specialized training in working with sex offenders were less likely to support sex offender myths. After conducting an independent samples T-test, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to sworn police officers' view of sex offenders between those who received formal training in working with sex offenders and those without specialized training. That result was inconsistent with previous literature examining the role that specialized training may have in the perpetuation or demise of sex offender myths (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015). That inconsistency may be explained by the high empirical knowledge showed by most sworn police officers in the sample, which may prevent finding differences between those who received specialized training and those who did not. Additionally, whether police officers received specialized training in working with sex offenders was measured by only one yes or no question. Further information about the type of training, its content, and duration may be necessary to be able to draw a conclusion about the impact of training in knowledge of sex offenders. It may be possible that the training they received was short, usually a one time one day long, workshop and did not cause significant long term impact on officers' knowledge and

attitudes. Research has shown not all training programs were successful in changing attitudes. Training programs must establish clear goals including improving knowledge, confidence, and attitudes toward a particular population to obtain the expected outcomes (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995). Prior experience, motivation, and level of qualification to work with that population are also important moderating factors of the impact of training on professionals' perceptions (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995). The exposition of facts about a population of offenders emphasizing the negative characteristics and impact on the victims may be counterproductive if the importance of developing a positive alliance to reduce unacceptable behavior is not addressed (Craig, 2005). What is more, sometimes previous experience may make professionals resistant to change their view and approach which, in turn, complicate the acceptance and integration of the content presented through training programs (Hogue, 1995). Hence, further examination of the type of training that those police officers received is required to be able to explain the results.

The last hypothesis sought to assess whether the perception of sworn police officers about sex offenders was related to the amount of contact they had with sex offenders. The amount of contact was measured as the frequency of direct contact with sex offenders, usage of sex offender registry, and work in a special unit. The results showed a weak correlation between both variables. The more contact police officers had with sex offenders, the more likely they were to support sex offender myths. For this final hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was also conducted to assess if the amount of contact in working with sex offenders was a good predictor of police officers' perceptions of sex offenders. That analysis was conducted while controlling for number of years working in the criminal justice system, age, and level of education. By controlling for these variables, it could be determined whether any of those variables rather than the contact with sex offenders had an effect on police officers' perceptions

of that population. The findings showed those variables had little to no effect on sworn police officers' view of sex offenders. These results did not corroborate previous studies stating that exposure to sex offenders influenced attitudes toward that population by increasing knowledge (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Hogue, 1993; Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2003; Weekes et al., 1995). The current study may suggest that contact with sex offenders alone may not contribute to a development of an empirically based opinion about sex offenders. As addressed above, sworn police officers contact with victims and focus on the deviant actions may facilitate the support of the stereotyping image of sex offenders.

The results of this study provided insight into sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders and SORN and residency restrictions laws. This thesis found most police officers had a mostly empirically based opinion about sex offenders, but they were likely to believe that sex offenders had a high recidivism rate and could not be rehabilitated. Additionally, consistent with previous studies, most police officers supported sex offender laws shown by some scholars to be ineffective in reducing crime and at times counterproductive; however, the limitations of this study may prevent generalizing the results to the whole population of sworn police officers in the United States. Law enforcement's perceptions regarding sex offenders and the laws enacted to control them need further examination. This thesis was an exploratory study and a number of questions still remain regarding this topic. The following section addresses the direction future research should take in reference to police officers' perceptions in regard to sex offenders, SORN, and residency restrictions laws.

### **Future Research**

For this study, sworn police officers supported sex offender laws and had a mostly scientific based opinion about sex offenders' characteristics; with the exception that despite



empirical evidence, they believed sex offenders were likely to reoffend and could not be rehabilitated. Police officers also seemed not to know the unintended consequences of the laws expressed by some researchers (Bruell et al., 2008; Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Levenson, 2008, 2010; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006). This thesis did not find any effects of specialized training, years of service in the criminal justice system, and amount of contact with sex offenders on police officers' perception of sex offenders. This may be explained by the small sample size, missing data, and lack of further information about the type of contact and training sworn police officers had. Thus, future research should use a larger random national sample to obtain representative results that could be generalized to the whole population of sworn police officers in the United States. However, it is important to be aware of the differences in the requirements and enactment of SORN laws in the state and local levels. Also, residency restrictions are not part of the requirements of federal SORN laws and more variety in the statewide status may exist. This lack of uniformity could complicate drawing general conclusions, but nationwide studies could help to identify which versions of registration, community notification, and residency restrictions are more effective in reducing sexual victimization, as well as their impact on sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender laws.

Furthermore, this thesis grouped together, under the label "sex offenders," all types of offenders who committed sexual crimes. As addressed in the literature review, sex offenders formed a very heterogeneous group of individuals who committed varied sex-related offenses for diverse reasons and had different risks of reoffending (Levenson & Hern, 2007; Sample & Bray, 2003; Walker, 2007). Sworn police officers in the sample might have responded differently if different types of sex offenders (i.e. rapists, pedophiles, child pornographers) would have been

specified. In line with the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), sworn police officers may be more likely to make judgments of sex offenders based on high-profile cases, which can easily be brought into mind. Their view of high sex offender recidivism rates and support of laws may be explained by their focus on the most dangerous sex offenders. As addressed by Conley et al. (2011), some missing data may be explained by the lack of specificity regarding the level of sex offender. Police officers' responses to some of the questions may depend on the type of sex offender. Future research should consider involving different types of sex offenders and even specify particular situations to examine the extent to which police officers support sex offender laws for different sexual-related offenses. That research would also provide information about police officers' definition of sex offenders and their knowledge of the characteristics of different types of sex offenders. In a recent study by Harris and colleagues (2016), law enforcement suggested redirecting the resources from lower risk offenders on the registry to higher risk offenders to improve the effectiveness of the laws. Further examination is required to analyze police officers' perceptions of sex offenders and the laws to which they are subject.

As addressed previously, the characteristics of specialized training programs in working with sex offenders and their impact on police officers' perception of sex offenders need to be further analyzed. Previous studies have argued that training with different duration, content, aims and objectives may have different impact on individuals' perception of sex offenders (Craig, 2005). Intense short specialized training may develop awareness and increase confidence in working with sex offenders (Craig, 2005); whereas a period of weeks may be required to significantly increase knowledge and change attitudes toward sex offenders (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 2015). Those studies focused on correctional and probation officers as well as practitioners; thus,

the findings might not be generalizable to police officers. Future research should examine which type of training may work with sworn police officers to develop awareness, increase knowledge, and change attitudes toward sex offenders.

As addressed throughout this thesis, little is known about sworn police officers' views of sex offenders, and their opinion about the fairness and efficacy of the laws enacted to control this population of offenders. This research is important because police officers' perceptions have the potential to affect the way they treat offenders and victims. Their opinion and experience may also inform policymakers about the utility of SORN and residency restrictions to manage sex offenders and protect the public from further sexual victimization. Since the present study was exploratory its results were not definitive, future research examining sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders, SORN, and residency restrictions would be beneficial to researchers, criminal justice agents, policy makers, and the community. This thesis concludes with a review of policy implications associated with the findings of this study.

### **Policy Implications**

The policy implications associated with this study are the improvement of SORN system, training for community members and criminal justice professionals, and potential modifications of the current sex offender laws. These policies implications are based on the results of this study and previous research in the area. Each of these policy implications are addressed in this section.

This study and previous research found law enforcement supported sex offender laws. They emphasized the use of SORN system as an effective tool to supervise sex offenders and inform the public. In relation to the former use of SORN, other studies have shown there are some limitations that may hamper this tool for being effectively used. The registries tend to include limited and outdated information about the offender and the offense. In a recent study by

Harris et al. (2016), 60 percent of the law enforcement officers complained the registries included incomplete offense histories. The insufficiency of offense-related information, inaccurate assessment of offenders' risk of reoffending (Harris et al., 2016), and outdated personal information such as residential address due to the frequent relocation (Terry & Ackerman, 2015) are examples of the limited use of SORN system. Transience and homelessness due to the strict residency restrictions in some states may also impede efforts to effectively track and monitor registered sex offenders (Harris et al., 2016; Levenson, 2010). Another limitation may be the lack of uniformity across the nation, which makes it difficult to track offenders that move from one state to another (Harris et al., 2016). More funding and staff to supervise the compliance of updating personal information in the registry and obeying residence restrictions seems to be necessary (Gaines, 2006). It may be understandable that SORN system may have a potential role in managing sex offenders; however, policy measures addressing the mentioned limitations seem to be required. Improving funding and the quality of the information included in the registries could be beneficial to improve the utility of this tool for criminal justice professionals.

In regard to the second potential utility of SORN system, it was designed to inform the public about sex offenders living in the community; therefore, they could adopt preventive measures to protect themselves and relatives from sexual victimization (Lynch, 2002). However, previous research has shown only a small portion of community members actually use the registry, and those who use it are unlikely to take precautions (e.g. Anderson & Sample, 2008; Boyle et al., 2014; Harris & Cudmore, 2016). Also, law enforcement expressed concern about the ability of the public to understand sex offender registry information and the potential for misunderstanding (Harris et al., 2016). Policy measures should enhance public access to sex

offender information and include more detailed information about sex offenders, their offenses, and the risk that they represent to the public. It may help promoting safety and preventive measures. Additionally, community members should be better informed about sex offenders' characteristics and sex offender laws. This population of offenders has the potential to cause fear within the community, and the laws may create a false sense of security (Harris et al., 2016). The development of an intervention that increases public awareness of sex offenders and registry information, as well as inform the public about preventive measures that they could take may be beneficial. However, due to the evidence suggesting that SORN and residency restrictions policies may not be contributing to public safety (Barnes, Dukes, Tewksbury, & DeTroye, 2009; Levenson & Cotter 2005; Levenson et al., 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Sandler et al., 2008; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Connor, 2014; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006, 2007; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2007), other prevention programs may be necessary such as community meetings and door-to-door contact (Gaines, 2006). They may focus on providing empirical based information about sex offenders, likely victims, preventive measures, and recidivism rates. It may contribute to increase awareness, reduce fear, and promote reporting of sexual offenses to authorities. To be able to inform the public accurately is paramount to train police officers in scientific evidence of sex offenders and the unintended consequences of sex offender laws.

Sworn police officers' perceptions of sex offenders have the potential to affect the way they treat offenders and victims. When criminal justice professionals are free of misconceptions, they may be more likely to establish interactions with sex offenders that bolster the opportunities for rehabilitation (Mustaine et al., 2015). It is known that specialized skills are required to work with sex offenders (Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999; Weekes et al., 1995). Thus, educational programs aimed at sworn police officers that increase accurate scientific based knowledge of sex

offenders and promote an optimistic view of this population may be necessary. Positive attitudes have been shown to be related to treatment effectiveness (Glaser, 1969). Thus, adopting more optimistic and accurate views of sex offenders may positively influence sex offender to become productive members in society. Likewise, police officers could transmit more accurate information to community members which, in turn, could facilitate the reintegration of these offenders into society. As addressed in this thesis, the training for sworn police officers in working efficiently with sex offenders should focus on increasing knowledge and confidence and altering negatives attitudes toward sex offenders. Additionally, those individuals with suitable qualifications and motivation may be selected for further training with the purpose of developing specialized sex crimes units. Lastly, working with sex offenders may be especially demanding and intense, which could affect the professionals' health, for example, emotional burnout (Shelby, Stoddart, & Taylor, 2001). Thus, they should be assisted with continuing education, techniques to reduce the impact of working in sex offender cases, informal peer-support, follow-up counseling, and supervision (Craig, 2005; Lea et al., 1999). By providing empirically based education to police officers, their interaction with offenders and victims may be more positive; however, sex offender laws should also be amended to reduce the negative unintended consequences in the offenders, the criminal justice agencies, and the community.

Policies based on empirical evidence instead of fear seem to be required. They should focus on reintegration rather than exclusion. If the criminal justice system and the community would assume that approach, informal and formal control over the individual would increase, which would reduce the probability of recidivism and, in turn, would enhance public safety. Sex offenders would be provided with alternatives to prison sentences and more likely to find housing, employment, and support in the community. Consequently, they would become

involved and committed to the society and less likely to commit further victimization. The overwhelming empirical evidence against the effectiveness of the current sex offender laws in deterring or reducing sex crimes calls for a change in policy and new alternatives to manage and monitor sex offenders. It may be important to reconsider the purpose of sex offender laws: regulative or punitive laws (Bedarf, 1995). Initially, these laws were designed to protect the public, but there are doubts about their fulfillment of that purpose and if these laws are in fact adding any extra protection to communities in terms of preventing sexual offenses. It seems that these laws may be more based on negative views of sex offenders, anger, and retributive and vengeful purposes (Redlich, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this thesis corroborated previous research that found law enforcement officers were likely to support sex offender laws (Finn, 1997; Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999; Mustaine et al., 2015; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2012; Redlich, 2001). Sworn police officers were knowledgeable of most characteristics of sex offenders; however, they believed sex offenders had a high risk of reoffending and could not be rehabilitated. Additionally, police officers were not aware of the unintended consequences of SORN and residency restrictions laws. Some researchers have argued sex offender laws were not fulfilling their purpose of public safety and reducing sex crimes (Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Nobles et al., 2012; Sandler et al., 2008). Nevertheless, sworn police officers stated they would support residency restrictions even if there was no scientific evidence to show their effectiveness. They also expressed all sex offenders should be registered and obligated to undergo community notification regardless of their risk of recidivism and their opportunity for rehabilitation. This study was exploratory in nature and its results should be considered in that context. To date, a limited

number of studies have focused on sworn police officers' opinion and knowledge of sex offenders and sex offender laws; therefore, it may be difficult to generalize the results to the whole population. Further examination of this topic should be conducted to understand police officers' views of sex offenders and sex offender laws, the variables that moderate those views, and the way those perceptions could be modified. Bringing empirical evidence into practice is paramount in enacting laws and policies that in fact protect the public rather than causing unintended consequences that may jeopardize their purpose. Laws and policies should be based on the most common offenders and crimes supported by empirical data with the purpose of targeting the most dangerous offenders, protecting the community from them, and reintegrating the low risk offenders into society. Communicating scientific knowledge to law enforcement is also crucial to manage sex offenders properly. Police officers and other criminal justice practitioners need to know the outcomes of their work because their experiential evidence, in addition to the empirically derived evidence, inform policymakers about the implementation, enforcement, and consequences of sex offender laws.



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## APPENDIX

### Survey

#### Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions about Sex Offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions Laws

##### Law enforcement officers' perceptions about sex offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions laws

**Dear Participant:**

My name is Maria Aparcero, and I am a graduate student at East Tennessee State University. I am working on my master thesis in Criminal Justice. In order to finish my studies, I need to complete this research project. The name of my research study is "Law enforcement officers' perceptions in regard to sex offenders and sex offender Registration and Notification (SORN) laws as well as Residency Restrictions policies."

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of law enforcement officers in regard to sex offender laws and regulations, rehabilitation, and community reentry. I would like to give a brief online survey to sworn police officers using [surveyMonkey.com](http://surveyMonkey.com). The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked a series of questions associated with sex offender policies such as registration, and residency restriction laws. This study will assist in providing more information about law enforcement professionals' beliefs in regard to sex offenders and sex offender laws, facilitate best practices for those who work with sex offenders and/or their victims, and possibly contribute to the enactment of more effective sex offender laws.

In order to ensure anonymity, your name will not be present on the survey nor the consent form. SurveyMonkey allows participants to consent by clicking "agree" rather than signing a document before being allowed to take the survey. In addition, [surveyMonkey.com](http://surveyMonkey.com) has security features that will be enabled: full name and email and IP addresses will not be collected. Your rights and privacy will be maintained, only the personnel particular to this research (the primary and secondary investigators associate with this research) and the ETSU Institutional Review Board (for non-medical research) will have access to the study records and all information will be kept anonymous.

If you do not want to fill out the survey, it will not affect you in any way. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer or simply exit the online survey form if you wish to remove yourself entirely. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. You can quit at any time.

If you have any research-related questions or problems, you may contact me, Maria Aparcero, at (276) 298-3046. We are working on this project together under the supervision of Chris Rush, PhD. You may reach her at (423) 439-5963. Also, the chairperson of the Institutional Review Board at East Tennessee State University is available at (423) 439-6054 if you have questions about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423/439-6055 or 423/439/6002.

Sincerely,  
Maria Aparcero

By completing the survey you agree that:  
You have read the above information.  
You voluntarily agree to participate.  
You are at least 18 years of age or older.

If you do not agree to participate you can simply turn in your copy of the survey.

## Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions about Sex Offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions Laws

1. The following questions are related to general information about sex offenders. Please, consider each statement individually and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of them.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Sex offenders reoffend at much higher rates compared to other criminals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Only a few sex offenders are dangerous.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders are more likely to be family members or acquaintances.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
With support and therapy someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Females can be sex offenders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Only females can be victims of sexual assault.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The vast majority of sex offenses are committed by strangers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders cannot be rehabilitated.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders are the worst kind of offenders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Children can be sexual abused by a female.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Children are the only victims who did nothing to instigate their sexual victimization.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
People who commit sex offenses want to have sex more often than the average person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders are more dangerous than other types of criminals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Females who commit sex offenses are coerced by a male (e.g. their husband).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Males are not at risk of being victims of sexual crimes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders should not be released back into the community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Females sex offenders always act with another person often a male.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Males can be raped by females.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions about Sex Offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions Laws

2. The following questions are related to sex offender Registration and Notification (SORN) laws as well as Residency Restriction policies applied to sex offenders. Please, consider each statement individually and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of them.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Sex offender registry is a useful management tool for supervising sex offenders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders should wear tracking devices, so their location can be pinpointed at any time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders' rights are violated with the enactment of SORN laws.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sex offenders' rights are violated with the enactment of residency restriction policies.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe residency restrictions are effective in reducing the number of sex offenses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
All sex offenders should be registered and obligated to undergo community notification regardless of their risk of recidivism and their opportunity for rehabilitation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would support residency restrictions even if there is no scientific evidence to show they are effective.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Registration and Community notification (SORN) are effective in reducing the number of sex offenses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Community notification law negatively affects local residents' behaviors or attitudes toward sex offenders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Registration and community notification (SORN) laws affect registered sex offender's ability to find or keep a job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Residency restriction policies affect registered sex offender's ability to find or keep a job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Registration and community notification (SORN) laws interfere with any registered sex offender's ability to find, and keep, a place to live.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Residency restriction policies interfere with any registered sex offender's ability to find, and keep, a place to live.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Registration and community notification (SORN) laws interfere with any registered sex offender's relationships with family members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Residency restriction policies interfere with any registered sex offender's relationships with family members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SORN laws make citizens feel safer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Residency restriction policies make citizens feel safer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Implementing and enforcing sex offender policies is burdensome and time consuming.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I believe registration and community notification laws in my community are fair.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe residency restriction policies in my community are fair.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



**Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions about Sex Offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions Laws**

3. Please select all that apply. I believe the following offenders should be subject to community notification

- No sex offenders
- Only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense
- All sex offenders
- Other (please specify)

4. Please select all that apply. I believe the following criminals should be subject to registration

- No criminals
- Only criminals with high risk of re-offense
- Only sex offenders with high risk of sexual re-offense
- All sex offenders
- Murderers
- All criminals
- Other (please specify)

## Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions about Sex Offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions Laws

5. The following questions focus on your experience and training as a law enforcement officer. Please, consider each statement individually and indicate the frequency in which you involve in these scenarios.

	Frequently (at least 1 a week)	Occasionally (at least 2 a month)	Rarely (once every 2-3 months)	Never
Use SORN when someone reports a sexual offense.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participate in posting and maintaining registry and notification.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have direct experience with sex offenders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work in a sex related offense case or crime.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. Please, consider each statement individually and indicate Yes or No.

	Yes	No
Are you a sworn police officer?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you ever worked in a sex offender special unit?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you currently work in a sex offender special unit?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you ever received any formal training in working with sex offenders?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Would you like to receive specialist training in working with sex offenders?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Would you be willing to work in sex offender cases?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions about Sex Offenders and SORN and Residency Restrictions Laws

### Demographics

7. Number of years working in the Criminal Justice system

8. Number of years served as a law enforcement officer

9. Sex/Gender

- Male  
 Female

10. Race

- White  
 Black  
 Hispanic-Latino  
 Other

11. Age

12. Level of Education

- Graduate high school/GED  
 Some college  
 College graduate  
 Post graduate

13. Marital Status

- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed

14. Number of children

15. In a scale from 1 to 7 (1 means very liberal and 7 very conservative), how do you rate your political affiliation.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION**

## VITA

### MARIA APARCERO-SUERO

- Education:                               Alonso Sanchez High School  
  Huelva, Spain 2010
- B.S. Psychology. University of Huelva  
  Huelva, Spain 2014
- M.A. Certificate Healthcare Translation & Interpreting  
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- M.A. Criminal Justice & Criminology  
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- Professional Experience:               Spanish Tutor, University of Virginia's College at Wise,  
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