

## **Public Perceptions About Sex Offenders and Community Protection Policies**

**Jill S. Levenson\***

*Lynn University*

**Yolanda N. Brannon**

*Florida Institute of Technology*

**Timothy Fortney**

*Florida Institute of Technology*

**Juanita Baker**

*Florida Institute of Technology*

*Sex offenders and sex crimes provoke a great deal of anxiety in our society, and over the past decade, lawmakers have passed a variety of social policies designed to protect the public from sexual victimization. The purpose of this study was to examine public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies. Data were obtained from a sample of 193 residents in Melbourne, Florida. It was hypothesized that the public holds some inaccurate beliefs about sex offenders, and that there is strong public support for community protection policies. It was found that community members believe that sex offenders have very high recidivism rates, view sex offenders as a homogeneous group with regard to risk, and are*

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\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jill S. Levenson, Lynn University, 3601 N. Military Trail, Boca Raton, FL 33431 [e-mail: [jlevenson@lynn.edu](mailto:jlevenson@lynn.edu)].

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*skeptical about the benefits of sex offender treatment. The hypothesis that public perceptions contradict empirical research was supported. Community members were overwhelmingly in favor of public disclosure of information about registered sex offenders, although they did not express as much support for residence restrictions. Implications for public policy, and for the media's role in shaping public perceptions, are discussed.*

As early as 1945, academic scholars were commenting on the reactions of the public to sex offenders:

“. . . there are periodic so-called sex crime waves often preceded by one or more serious sex offenses which have received wide notoriety in the newspapers. Every sex offender is looked upon as a potential murderer. Emotions run high. There are meetings and conferences; recommendations are made. . . . Meanwhile, sex offenses continue to occur” (Hirning, 1945, p. 105).

Sex offenders and sex crimes incite a great deal of fear among the general public and as a result, lawmakers have passed a variety of social policies designed to protect community members from sexual victimization (LaFond, 2005; Lees & Tewksbury, 2006; Petrunik, 2003; Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Wright, 2003). Legislative initiatives since the early 1990s have included sex offender registration, community notification, civil commitment, residence restrictions, enhanced sentencing guidelines, and electronic monitoring (LaFond, 2005). Such laws are popular with lawmakers and their constituents (Caputo, 2001; LaFond, 2005; Matson & Lieb, 1996b; Phillips, 1998; Sample, 2001; Sample & Kadleck, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Zevitz, 2006a), although little empirical research has established their effectiveness in preventing sexual violence or decreasing sex offense recidivism. This descriptive study sought to examine public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies.

### *Background*

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, which required all 50 states to maintain a registry of sex offenders' addresses so that their whereabouts were known to local law enforcement agencies (“Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act,” 1994). In 1996, the Wetterling Act was amended to allow for community notification (“Megan’s Law”), which permitted law enforcement personnel to disclose registry information to neighborhood residents about sex offenders who live in close proximity. The Wetterling Act is a federal law that provides guidelines to the states but is implemented and administered at the state level. Some states notify the public only about sex offenders who pose a high risk to the community, but other states employ broad notification practices and disseminate information about all registered sex offenders.

Recent developments have included the mandate of state Internet websites listing convicted sex offenders (“Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act,” 2003), and the establishment of a national online sex offender registry that allows a search beyond one’s own state borders (“Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006,” 2006; “Pam Lyncher Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act of 1996,” 1996).

Early community notification strategies commonly included press releases, flyers, and door-to-door warnings about the presence of sex offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Matson & Lieb, 1996a; Zevitz, Crim, & Farkas, 2000a). Since states are now federally mandated to post their sex offender registries online, however, the Internet appears to have become the primary source of information about convicted sex offenders (Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2006; Vermont Legislative Council, 2005). The goals of sex offender registration and notification are to increase the public’s awareness of sex offenders and to help people protect themselves and their children from sex crimes (Phillips, 1998; Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002; Quinn et al., 2004; Sample & Kadleck, 2006; Wright, 2003).

#### *Public Perceptions About Sex Offender Notification*

A public opinion survey in Washington indicated that 80% of 400 residents surveyed in 1997 were familiar with community notification policies, commonly known as Megan’s Law, and that 80% of that group believed that the law was very important (Phillips, 1998). The majority reported that they felt safer knowing where convicted sex offenders lived, and speculated that community notification might help offenders better manage their behavior because neighbors were watching them. About half of the respondents acknowledged the potential for vigilantism and 75% agreed that notification might make it more difficult for sex offenders to reintegrate into communities with regard to housing, jobs, and social support. Females were significantly more likely than males to be frightened or angry about a sex offender moving into the neighborhood. Age was also a significant factor in the level of fear reported, with 30- to 40-year olds expressing more concerns than those over 50 or under 30 (perhaps because those in their thirties are more likely to have young children). Interestingly, however, more than half of the parents reported no change in their own behaviors with regard to supervision of their children as a result of community notification (Phillips, 1998).

A poll in England in May 2005 surveyed a random sample of 558 young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 (News of the world, 2005). Respondents were overwhelmingly (86%) in favor of the public having access to information about registered sex offenders. More than half (57%) believed that the public has a right to know about all convicted child molesters living in the local area, while 29% believed the public should be told only about those judged to pose a risk

to children. Only 16% of those surveyed believed that convicted child molesters could live safely in a community without posing a threat to youngsters. Despite their support for community notification, only 11% indicated a belief that children are safer now than they were 5 years ago, and 69% did not believe that enough was being done to protect potential victims from sex offenders (News of the world, 2005).

Parents and concerned neighbors often describe the goal of community notification as “providing as much information as possible to safeguard against any potential threats posed by sex offenders” (Zevitz et al., 2000a, p. 399). However, some residents have reported that notification actually increased their anxiety because information about offenders is not usually accompanied by information about protecting oneself or one’s children from assault (Caputo, 2001; Zevitz et al., 2000a). A telephone survey of 250 residents in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who had experienced sex offender notification, found that females and parents of minor children were more likely than males and non-parents to feel that community notification was important (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004). Parents and women expressed more fear of crime in general and of sexual assault specifically (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004).

In 2005, after the widely publicized murder of 9-year-old Jessica Lunsford by a convicted sex offender in Florida, the state of Florida became the first to pass “Jessica’s Law,” increasing penalties for sex crimes against children and requiring electronic monitoring for child molesters who are released from prison. By June 2006, 24 states had passed a version of “Jessica’s Law,” often including mandatory minimum sentences, electronic monitoring, and residence restrictions prohibiting sex offenders from living near schools, parks, playgrounds, bus stops, or other places where children congregate (Fox News, June 2, 2006). The San Francisco Chronicle reported that 73% of voters supported Jessica’s Law in California (Martin & Marinucci, 2006).

Though the public and lawmakers are supportive of sex offender policies, scholars remain skeptical about the potential of these laws to protect children or prevent sex crimes (Freeman-Longo, 1996; Jones, 1999; Levi, 2000; Lotke, 1997; Prentky, 1996; Zevitz, 2006b). They suggest that community notification laws are driven by emotional responses to sexual violence rather than by empirical data, and that they provide misguided reassurance to citizens. The majority (80%) of mental health professionals surveyed believed that registries would have no impact on reducing the incidence of child sexual abuse, and 70% thought community notification would foster a false sense of security for parents (Malesky & Keim, 2001). Another oft-cited concern is the potential for notification to create unintended consequences that interfere with offender reintegration by limiting opportunities for housing, employment, and social support (Levenson, 2003; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson et al., 2006; Petersilia, 2003; Tewksbury, 2004; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz, Crim, & Farkas, 2000b).

*Effectiveness of Community Notification*

Few empirical studies have evaluated the effect of registration and notification on recidivism (Welchans, 2005). The earliest study found no statistically significant difference in recidivism rates between offenders who were subjected to notification in Washington (19% recidivism) and those who were not (22% recidivism) (Matson & Lieb, 1996b). There was, however, evidence that registration and notification assisted law enforcement agents to apprehend suspects more quickly for new sex crimes than those not publicly identified (Matson & Lieb, 1996b). In Iowa, 223 sex offenders subjected to sex offender registration were tracked for an average of 4.3 years. Their sex offense recidivism rate (3%) was not significantly different from a control group of 201 sex offenders (3.5%) who were not required to register because they were adjudicated before the law went into effect (Adkins, Huff, & Stageberg, 2000). In Wisconsin, there were no statistically significant differences between 47 high-risk sex offenders exposed to aggressive community notification (19% recidivism) and 166 high-risk sex offenders who were not aggressively identified (12% recidivism) (Zevitz, 2006b).

A more recent examination of the recidivism rates of offenders subjected to registration and notification policies in Washington found some support for the effectiveness of community notification (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2005). After controlling for generally decreasing crime trends, researchers found a significant reduction in sex offense recidivism (from 5% to 1%) after 1997, when community notification procedures in Washington were standardized across the state (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2005). While the authors acknowledged they were unable to account for other possible explanations for this reduction (e.g., more severe sentencing guidelines or improved probationary supervision), they concluded that community notification may have contributed to decreased sexual offending. Notably, Washington reserves its most aggressive community notification for its highest-risk offenders. Consequently, the results might be generalizable only to those states that discriminate between high- and low-risk offenders.

An interrupted time-series analysis investigated the impact of registration and notification laws on sexual assault rates in 10 states (Walker, Maddan, Vasquez, VanHouten, & Ervin-McLarty, 2005). Three states experienced a significant decrease in sex crime rates, but five other states demonstrated an increase in sexual assault rates, with one of those increases being statistically significant. The authors concluded that registration and notification policies did not appear to have a systematic influence on reducing sex crime rates across the 10 states.

A special committee convened by the Vermont legislature to investigate the efficacy of Internet sex offender registries noted: "Currently, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether posting information about registered sex offenders on the Internet is a valuable and effective public safety tool; however, the

[Vermont] general assembly determined . . . that the majority of the public feels that the Internet registry provides important information that can be used to protect families and expects such information to be a matter of public record” (Vermont Legislative Council, 2005, p. 11).

Even in the absence of compelling evidence that community notification has any impact on sex offense recidivism rates, these laws appear to make people feel safer (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; LaFond, 2005; Phillips, 1998; Sample, 2001). The present authors suggest that such laws are not guided by empirical evidence, but are driven instead by myths perpetuated and reinforced by the media (Jones, 1999; Lotke, 1997; Proctor et al., 2002; Quinn et al., 2004; Sample, 2001; Wright, 2003).

### *Common Myths About Sex Offenders*

High recidivism rates are often cited in support of sex offender legislation (Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006), despite several studies by both the U.S. and Canadian governments that found sex offense recidivism rates to be much lower than commonly believed (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Bussiere, 1996, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005; Harris & Hanson, 2004). The U.S. Department of Justice found a 5.3% rate of sex offense recidivism among over 9,000 offenders within 3 years of their release from prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). Canadian researchers tracked nearly 30,000 sex offenders from North America and the United Kingdom and found a 14% average recidivism rate among sex offenders over 4- to 6-year follow-up periods (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005). Even over longer follow-up periods of 15 years, researchers have established that the large majority (76%) of sexual offenders were not rearrested for new sex crimes (Harris & Hanson, 2004). Although it is believed that sex offenders have the highest recidivism rates among criminals, they are among the least likely criminals to be rearrested for new crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006).

Skepticism about sex offenders' capacity to benefit from psychological interventions also appears to be a driving force behind sex offender legislation, especially in the wake of random sexual violence against children by repeat sex offenders (Quinn et al., 2004; Sample, 2001). Uncertainty about the effectiveness of sex offender treatment has been rampant for decades since a landmark study was unable to detect differences in recidivism rates between treated and untreated sex offenders (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989). More recently, several sophisticated experimental designs have also failed to find significant treatment effects (Hanson, Broom, & Stephenson, 2004; Marques, Miederanders, Day, Nelson, & van Ommeren, 2005). However, some meta-analyses have found that contemporary cognitive-behavioral treatment with a relapse prevention component can reduce sex offense recidivism (Hanson et al., 2002; Losel & Schmucker, 2005). Hanson et al. (2002) found that 10% of treated sex offenders were rearrested for a new sex crime, compared with 17% of untreated offenders. This statistically signifi-

cant difference was similar to the findings of Losel and Schmucker (2005), who concluded that sex offender treatment reduced recidivism by 40%. Marques et al. (2005) found no overall differences between treated and untreated sex offenders, but even so reported that sex offenders who successfully completed the goals of the treatment program (as opposed to simply being assigned to the program for the study period) reoffended less frequently than those who did not demonstrate that they “got it” (p. 97). Although the research is not unequivocal, there is evidence that treatment can be helpful for many sex offenders.

Finally, sex offender policies, often inspired by child abductions and sexually motivated murders, seem to be based on the presumption that children are at great risk from predators who lurk in schoolyards and playgrounds. Actually, sex offenders very rarely kill their victims and are not more likely to do so than other criminals (Sample, 2006). Also, 93% of child sexual abuse perpetrators are known to their victims (Berliner, Schram, Miller, & Milloy, 1995; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000); about 34% are family members and 59% are acquaintances (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Perpetrators reported that their victims were strangers in less than 30% of rapes and 15% of sexual assaults (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997). In Wisconsin, it was found that none of the recidivistic offenses in the study sample were for predatory sex crimes involving strangers (Zevitz, 2006b). The myth of stranger danger may lead to a false security for parents, whose children are at greatest risk of being abused by someone they know and trust (Berliner et al., 1995).

A survey in Colorado compared college students’ perceptions of child molesters with those of professionals who work with sex offenders (Fuselier, Durham, & Wurtele, 2002), and found that students were likely to endorse stereotypical characteristics. For instance, students were more likely than professionals to believe that a large percentage of child abusers are strangers, and that sex offenders tend to use force, aggression, or threats in the commission of a sex crime (Fuselier et al., 2002). Fuselier et al. (2002) noted that the general public tends to believe child molesters are social misfits, strangers, or “dirty old men” (p. 272).

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Florida residents about sex offenders and about community protection policies. The objectives of the study were twofold: (1) to explore the accuracy of public perceptions about sex offenders and the dangers they pose; and (2) to determine what residents think about community protection practices and their perceived effectiveness. It was hypothesized that the general public subscribes to many inaccurate beliefs about sex offenders, including myths of high recidivism rates, unamenability to treatment, and stranger danger. We also postulated that there is strong public support for community protection policies. Florida was viewed as an ideal state in which to conduct such research. Florida has one of the most comprehensive registration

and notification policies in the nation, employing broad notification of all sex offenders through aggressive community-based strategies and via the state's public Internet registry. This study adds data from a different geographical region to the small body of literature regarding public perceptions about sex offenders.

## Method

### *Sample*

The data were collected from 193 participants of driving age in Melbourne, Florida, during August of 2005. It should be noted that in the six months prior to the data collection, two highly publicized cases of abduction and murder of young girls by previously convicted sex offenders took place in Central Florida. These cases were discussed in the media frequently during this time period, and Mark Lunsford, the father of one of the victims, very publicly advocated for increased penalties and monitoring for sex criminals. Thus, the data were collected during a time of extensive media coverage regarding violent sex crimes against children, likely increasing the sample's awareness of the issue.

Melbourne is located in Brevard County, on the central east coast of Florida, about an hour from the Kennedy Space Center. Females were slightly over-represented (57%) in the sample. The mean age was 37 years old. The median income was reported to be between \$30,000 and \$40,000. The sample reported their ethnicity as 69% Caucasian, 11% African-American, 14% Hispanic, and 2.7% Asian. Participants reported an average of 14 years of education.

The sample obtained appears to be roughly comparable to 2000 U.S. Census Bureau statistics for the county with regard to age, income, ethnicity, and education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Brevard County population is made up of 519,387 citizens, with 19.9% of the population aged 65 years and older and 22% representing persons under the age of 18. The county's median household income is \$40,099. Caucasians represent 86.8% of the population, African-Americans comprise 8.4%, and persons of Hispanic or Latino origin encompass 4.6%, suggesting that our sample was slightly more diverse. In 2000, 86.3% of the adults residing in Brevard County had completed a high school education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

### *Procedures*

This study was carried out according to federal guidelines for the ethical treatment of human research subjects. Prior to conducting this study, approval from a University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained. Following the IRB approval, a request was submitted to the State of Florida Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and permission was obtained to collect data at two DMV offices in Melbourne, Florida. The data were collected in both DMV offices within four



consecutive business days. On all days at both DMV offices, there were approximately 50–80 people waiting from 4 to 6 hours before being served. Therefore, filling out a questionnaire was a way to occupy their time. The researchers made an attempt not to bias the sample by systematically approaching all those standing, those sitting, those with children, and those outside smoking, trying not to skip anyone. The researchers introduced themselves, explained the purpose of the study, sought participation, answered questions, provided a clip board, a pencil, the informed consent form and the questionnaire, and made certain participants understand that completing the questionnaire implied consent. Completed surveys were collected by the researchers and placed in an unmarked envelope. All those asked to participate did consent, except three people with limited English skills who were unable to complete the questionnaire. Five people identified themselves (from one question in the survey) as sexual offenders, so before the analysis they were dropped from the sample.

### *Instrumentation*

A questionnaire was devised to gather information from community members about their perceptions of sex offenders, their familiarity with notification laws, and their opinions about the ability of community protection strategies to prevent further sexual abuse of children. The survey incorporated considerations from previous research that investigated public perceptions about sex offenders and community notification policies. Five general areas were assessed, and survey questions were asked in the exact way they are reported in the corresponding tables.

1. Familiarity with community notification. Survey participants were asked to identify the methods of community notification used in their neighborhoods, and to report how often they observed these strategies. The list of choices included strategies identified as common in previous research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Matson & Lieb, 1996a; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000): flyers, door-to-door warnings, neighborhood meetings, and press releases. Participants were asked to rate the frequency with which they observed common notification strategies in their neighborhoods on a Likert scale from “never” to “regularly.” An additional category of “I don’t know” was added for participants who were unfamiliar with notification procedures used in their communities. Participants were then asked to give their opinion about whether certain strategies are successful at reducing sexual abuse simply by endorsing “yes” or “no” to each item listed.
2. Types of information that should be disclosed to the public. Next, participants were asked to rate their agreement (yes/no) to the statement: “The public should be informed of the following information about sex offenders.” A list of items followed (e.g., name, photo, fingerprints, home address, names of others with whom the offender lives, telephone number, employment address,

vehicle description, license plate, description of crimes, HIV/AIDS status, victim name, and victim age). Participants rated their dichotomous agreement regarding whether the public should be privy to each item. The proportion answering “yes” to each item was tabulated.

3. Beliefs and perceptions about sex offenders and sex crimes. Participants were asked a series of eleven questions designed to determine the accuracy of their knowledge about sex offenders, recidivism, victim/offender dynamics, and sex crime statistics. The survey asked respondents to choose an answer that best represented their belief on a scale that ranged from 0 to 100% in increments of 10%. The mean response was then tabulated. For instance, participants were asked “what percentage of child molesters reoffend?” and were asked to choose the percentage that best indicated their belief. Participants were then asked to rate their agreement with five statements about sex offender treatment, sex crime rates, and sex offender characteristics. These items were rated on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not true at all” and 5 being “completely true.”
4. Opinions about the optimal length of sentencing, treatment, and probation. The survey asked several questions eliciting beliefs about appropriate sentencing, treatment, and probation. The answer sheet allowed for a two-digit open-ended response box when the question specified “how many years . . .” and a three-digit response box when the question asked “how many months . . .”
5. Confidence in community protection strategies. Finally, participants were given a list of community protection strategies, and were asked: “Do you think the following strategies are effective at reducing sexual offenses?” The proportion answering “yes” to each item was tabulated. Participants were also asked to respond to the statement “I would support these policies even if there is no scientific evidence showing that they reduce sexual abuse” by endorsing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not true at all” to “completely true.”

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 13 (SPSS, 2005). Analytic techniques primarily employed descriptive statistics, and *t*-tests were utilized to determine mean differences between groups.

## **Results**

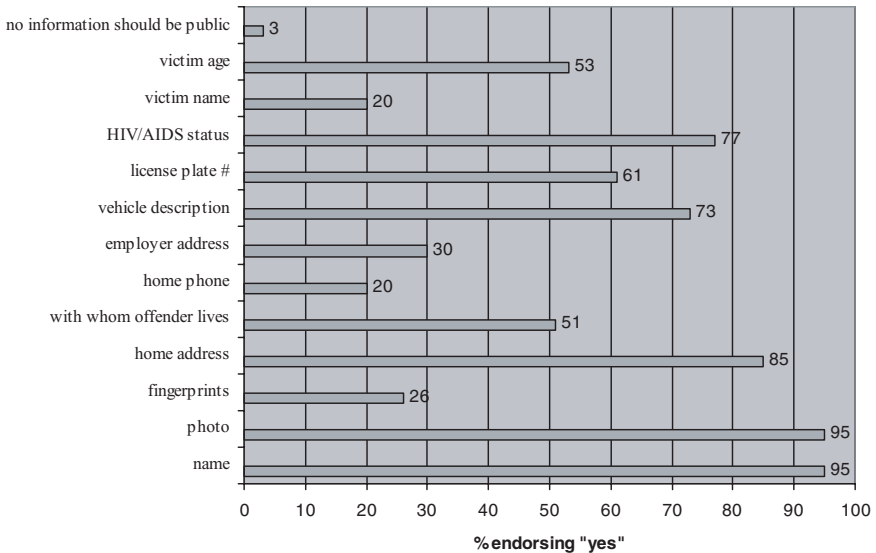
First, participants were asked about the types of community notification procedures that they observed in their neighborhoods (see Table 1). The purpose of this question was to determine their familiarity with strategies most often used to notify the public about sex offenders living nearby. Although diverse strategies appeared to be used in a small number of neighborhoods, the majority of participants

**Table 1.** Methods of Community Notification

	Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	Regularly	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%
Flyers are posted in my neighborhood to show and/or warn of convicted sex offenders who live nearby	56%	17%	8%	4%	15%
The police or someone else goes door-to-door to inform neighbors that sex offenders live nearby	63%	9%	3%	4%	22%
My neighborhood holds meetings to inform neighbors of the presence of sex offenders who live nearby	62%	7%	3%	2%	26%
Flyers are sent home with school children to alert families that sex offenders live nearby	39%	13%	6%	4%	38%
The local newspaper in my neighborhood publishes the whereabouts of sex offenders who live nearby	21%	25%	10%	11%	33%
Which of the following means of notification are effective in reducing sexual abuse?	% answering "yes"				
Flyers posted in the neighborhood	66%				
Police go door-to-door to inform	58%				
Neighborhood meetings	55%				
Internet access to registration information	68%				
Automated telephone calls warning neighbors	30%				

reported that notification procedures are not common events. Nonetheless, the majority of participants reported believing that community notification strategies are effective at reducing rates of sexual abuse.

The majority of respondents reported that the public should have access to a vast array of information regarding sex offenders living in the community (see Figure 1). Interestingly, they seemed willing to afford some privacy rights to sex offenders, as indicated by the majority who believed that fingerprints, home telephone number, and employment information should not be disclosed. Most (80%) were concerned about the identities of victims becoming public, although 65% appeared to see some value in disclosing the age of the victim.



**Fig. 1.** The public should be informed of the following information about sex offenders.

Table 2 describes participants' beliefs and perceptions about sex offenders and sex crimes. Those surveyed appeared to believe that sex offenders have high recidivism rates, that many sex offenses are committed by strangers, and that nearly half of sex offenses are reported to authorities. They appeared to be somewhat skeptical about the value of psychological therapy in preventing recidivism, were concerned that sex crime rates are rising, and viewed sex offenders as more likely to reoffend than other types of criminals.

Table 3 shows the participants' responses to questions about the optimal length of sentencing, treatment, and probation. The participants appeared to support tough sentencing laws and long periods of community supervision, but also believed that those sanctions should be supplemented with treatment. The bottom portion of Table 3 tabulated responses to the question "which sex offenders should be subject to community notification?" The survey gave a forced choice of four possible responses, and the percentage endorsing each response is shown. More than three quarters of the sample supported broad community notification policies, as indicated by their endorsement that all sex offenders should be subject to community notification.

Participants were asked about their confidence that a range of community protection policies are effective in reducing sexual violence (see Table 4). Although high proportions of respondents appeared to believe that most strategies can reduce sexual offending, just over half seemed to believe in the effectiveness of residence restrictions and chemical castration. Nearly three quarters (73%) indicated that

**Table 2.** Perceptions About Sex Offenders and Sex Crimes

	N	Mean	SD	Median	Mode
What percentage of sex offenders commit another sex offense?	191	74%	20.2	80	80
What percentage of child molesters reoffend?	192	76%	20.6	80	90
What percentage of rapists reoffend?	191	74%	21.7	80	90
What percentage of adult offenders were sexually abused as children?	193	67%	20.8	70	80
What percentage of sex assaults of adults are committed by strangers?	191	49%	20.4	50	50
What percentage of sex offenders are severely mentally ill?	191	50%	31.7	50	20
What percentage of children find sex with an adult a positive experience?	191	12%	22.8	0	0
What percentage of boys are abused by someone they know?	191	58%	24.6	60	80
What percentage of girls are abused by someone they know?	192	63%	22.4	70	80
What percentage of sex offenders are male?	192	77%	16.6	80	90
What percentage of sex offenders come to the attention of authorities?	193	46%	18.8*	50	30, 50*

	N	Percent answering "somewhat true" or "completely true"
Sex offenders who receive specialized psychological treatment will reoffend.	192	50%
Abuse only occurs in low socio-economic classes.	190	7%
Sex offense rates are on the rise	192	77%
Alcohol and drugs play a moderate or major role in sex offending.	192	65%
Sex offenders reoffend at much higher rates compared to other criminals.	193	68%

\*Bi-modal.

they were likely to support such policies even in the absence of scientific evidence that they achieved their goals.

We were curious to see whether attitudes toward sex offenders and community notification would differ between certain groups of respondents. Previous research suggested that sex, parenthood, and age were predictive of fear of sex offenders and support of community notification (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Phillips, 1998). Age and parenthood seemed to be related, as those in their thirties are likely to have minor children (Phillips, 1998). We hypothesized that females and parents would be more angry and fearful of sex offenders, would be less tolerant of sex offenders living among them, and would have more favorable attitudes toward notification.

**Table 3.** Beliefs About Sentencing and Treatment

	N		Mean	Median	Mode	Std Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid	Missing						
How many years do you believe that sex offenders should serve in prison?	122	71	38.8	25	99	34.76	2	99
How many years should sex offenders be on probation?	110	83	41.9	22	99	39.64	0	99
How many months of treatment should sex offenders receive in prison?	113	80	51	36	99	48.27	0	300
How many months of treatment should sex offenders receive after prison?	113	80	47.5	36	99	40.03	0	240
<b>Which sex offenders should be subject to community notification?</b>								
No sex offenders						1.6%		
All sex offenders except those rated low risk with no history of violence						6.3%		
All sex offenders rated high risk						5.8%		
All sex offenders						76.3%		

**Table 4.** Do You Think the Following Strategies Are Effective in Reducing Sexual Offenses?

	% answering "yes"
Community notification	83%
Restricting where sex offenders can live	58%
Treatment in prison	71%
Treatment in the community	65%
Community education	55%
Chemical castration	51%
Restitution	38%
Prison	67%
Electronic monitoring	62%
I would support these policies even if there is no scientific evidence showing that they reduce sexual abuse	
Partially true	24%
Completely true	49%

**Table 5.** Differences in Responses Between Groups

	Sex	N	Mean	SD
Notification fairness	Male	81	2.6	1.3
	Female	108	2.5	1.2
Anger felt if offender in your area	Male	79	6.7	3.2
	Female	107	7.6	2.9
Fear felt if offender in your area***a	Male	72	6.3	3.5
	Female	104	8.3	2.5
Agree with Community Notification Law* <sup>a</sup>	Male	80	2.7	1.1
	Female	107	3.0	1.0
Tolerant of sex offender in community	Male	82	0.8	1.0
	Female	109	0.8	1.1
Notification gives false sense of security	Male	81	2.0	1.3
	Female	110	2.0	1.2
	Abused before age 15	N	Mean	SD
Notification fairness	No	148	2.5	1.2
	Yes	39	2.7	1.3
Anger felt if offender in your area	No	144	7.1	3.1
	Yes	40	7.6	2.9
Fear felt if offender in your area	No	135	7.4	3.1
	Yes	39	7.9	2.9
Agree with Community Notification Law	No	147	2.9	1.0
	Yes	38	2.8	1.3
Tolerant of sex offender in community	No	149	0.9	1.1
	Yes	40	0.6	0.8
Notification gives false sense of security	No	148	2.0	1.2
	Yes	41	2.0	1.3
	Parent	N	Mean	SD
Notification fairness	No	73	2.5	1.2
	Yes	117	2.6	1.2
Anger felt if offender in your area*	No	70	6.5	3.1
	Yes	117	7.6	3.0
Fear felt if offender in your area	No	67	7.1	3.1
	Yes	110	7.7	3.1
Agree with Community Notification Law	No	74	2.8	1.1
	Yes	114	2.9	1.1
Tolerant of sex offender in community*	No	75	1.0	1.1
	Yes	117	0.7	1.0
Notification gives false sense of security	No	75	2.0	1.1
	Yes	117	2.0	1.3

Note. Ratings of anger and fear were on a 10-point Likert scale. All other questions were on a 5-point scale.

\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed  $t$ -tests).

<sup>a</sup> Statistically significant using Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons;  $p < .008$ .

Table 5 compares the mean responses to questions on which participants were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the fairness of notification, their agreement with notification laws, their tolerance of sex offenders in the community, and their agreement with whether notification gives the public a false sense of security. They were also asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, the degree of anger and fear they would experience if a sex offender moved into their neighborhoods. Females were

significantly more likely than men to feel a greater degree of fear, but not anger, if a sex offender resided nearby ( $p < .001$ ). Females were also more likely than males to agree with community notification laws ( $p < .05$ ). Parents rated their degree of anger as significantly higher than non-parents ( $p < .05$ ), and non-parents were significantly more likely to have greater degrees of tolerance for sex offenders living in their community ( $p < .05$ ).

Previous research has not specifically investigated whether individuals who were themselves sex crime victims would differ in their attitudes from those who had not been victimized. We hypothesized that child abuse victims would be more fearful and angry, and less tolerant of sex offenders. In the demographic section of the survey, participants were asked to answer “yes” or “no” to the following question: *I was sexually abused before the age of 15*. No specific definition of sexual abuse was given. Mean differences between the abused and non-abused groups were then analyzed using the same items as noted above. No significant differences were found on any of these questions between those who identified themselves as child sexual abuse victims and those who did not.

Because multiple  $t$ -tests can lead to spurious findings, the Bonferroni technique was used to test the statistical significance of multiple comparisons. This method involves adjusting the significance threshold for rejecting the null hypothesis, and is calculated by dividing the alpha level by the number of comparisons (Vogt, 1999). In this case, the significance level,  $p < .05$ , was divided by 6, which reflected the number of items that were tested for each group comparison [ $.05/6 = .008$ ]. Using this more conservative threshold, only two items were statistically significant. Females rated their level of fear significantly greater than males, and females rated their agreement with community notification as significantly higher than males. Wilks’s Lambda is a statistic used to test for equality of group means in multivariate tests. In these analyses, Wilks’s Lambda was significant ( $p < .001$ ) only with regard to differences between the sexes on the six questions listed (Wilks’s Lambda = .836;  $F = 5.310$ ,  $df = 6$ ). There were no significant differences based on parenthood or childhood abuse experience.

## Discussion

Community notification activities in Brevard County, Florida appear to be surprisingly uncommon, as evidenced by the high number of participants who reported that notification strategies *never* take place in their communities. Very few indicated that notification activities take place regularly or most of the time. Previous research found community notification procedures to be more common (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Matson & Lieb, 1996a; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). It appears that our participants were largely unaware of such efforts in their communities, in which case it might be fair to say that notification is not very successful in reaching its intended audience. It is therefore curious that the majority



of respondents opined that such strategies are successful in reducing sexual abuse. An alternative explanation is that because states are now required to maintain online sex offender registries, the public is most likely to seek information about sex offenders via the Internet, and more costly and time-consuming community-based methods of notifying the public are on the decline.

Despite their support of notification methods, the majority of respondents appeared to be willing to afford sex offenders some privacy, specifically with regard to telephone numbers and employment information. It is possible that citizens feel that phone numbers offer little advantage to the public in protecting themselves. With support growing for increased access to information, as in recently passed federal legislation (“Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006,” 2006), lawmakers should take note that 70% of our respondents did not feel that employment information would be useful for community protection. Such practices, if implemented, will almost surely result in unintended consequences such as significant decreases in employment opportunities for offenders, since employers will likely be eager to avoid being associated with the sex offender registry.

The hypothesis that community members hold inaccurate beliefs about sex offenders was supported. Respondents estimated sex offense recidivism rates to be around 75%. In contrast, the best available evidence suggests that sex offense recidivism rates range from 5 to 14% over 3- to 6-year follow-up periods (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005) and 24% over 15-year follow-up periods (Harris & Hanson, 2004). Although official recidivism data underestimate true reoffense rates (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998), ample evidence suggests that the majority of convicted sex offenders do not go on to commit new sex crimes. It might have been interesting to ask respondents about their sources of information, but we speculate that the media furnishes a substantial amount of this type of data to most people (Lotke, 1997; Proctor et al., 2002; Sample & Kadleck, 2006).

A small proportion of our respondents acknowledged that all sex offenders are not the same and that they might represent a range of risk. However, 76% believed that all sex offenders should be subject to notification, suggesting that most people subscribe to the myth that all sex offenders pose an equal and serious threat to communities. Only 12% favored allowing lower-risk offenders to be excluded from public registries. Research suggests, however, that sex offenders represent a heterogeneous group with regard to recidivism risk (Harris & Hanson, 2004). There are some sex offenders, of course, who are highly dangerous, with pedophiles who molest boys and rapists of adult women among those most likely to recidivate (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Prentky, Lee, Knight, & Cerce, 1997).

Sex offenders in general were seen by our sample as the criminals most likely to reoffend, even though *in toto* they have lower rearrest rates for their crime of choice than other types of offenders (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample

& Bray, 2003, 2006). For example, robbers are more likely to be rearrested for robbery, burglars are more likely to repeat crimes of burglary, and those who have committed nonsexual assault are more likely to do so again than sex criminals are to repeat their crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003).

Our results indicated that many people presume that the majority of sex offenders were molested as children. It is commonly assumed that early sexual abuse is a precursor to offending, and to most people, this probably seems like a logical and parsimonious etiological explanation for sexual violence. However, a meta-analysis of empirical studies involving a total of 1,717 subjects found that about 28% of sex offenders reported a history of childhood sexual abuse (Hanson & Slater, 1988). The association between childhood victimization and adult sex offending appears to be a complex interaction involving multiple variables, and cannot be explained by simple cause and effect (Hanson & Slater, 1988).

Our participants believed that half of sex offenders are seriously mentally ill, even though Abel, Mittleman, and Becker (1985) reported that among their 232 child molesters, 60% had no psychopathology other than their sexual deviance and less than 5% showed evidence of psychosis. Others have found a high prevalence of mood disorders among sex offenders, but more common were ADHD, substance abuse disorders, and anxiety disorders (Kafka & Hennen, 2002). Major mental illness has not been found to be predictive of sex offense recidivism (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). Those surveyed in this study believed that alcohol and drugs play an important role in sex offending. Although substance abuse can be a dynamic risk factor for ongoing offending (Hanson & Harris, 1998), large meta-analyses have found no association between a history of substance use and sexual recidivism (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004).

Respondents were accurate in their assessment that many victims know their abusers, but overestimated the number of sexual assaults committed by strangers. Apparently the myth that many rapes occur in dark alleys remains prevalent, despite evidence to the contrary (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002, 2004). Also, there continues to be a perception that sex crime rates are on the rise, probably due to the attention that these crimes receive in the media. In fact, rape arrest rates have decreased steadily since 1991 (Maguire & Pastore, 2003), and child sexual abuse rates have also declined (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004; Jones & Finkelhor, 2003). On the other hand, those surveyed were optimistic in their estimation that 47% of sex crimes come to the attention of authorities. It is difficult to truly know what proportion of sex crimes are investigated, but unofficial reports have suggested much higher rates of perpetration than of detection (Abel et al., 1987; Ahlmeyer, Heil, McKee, & English, 2000; English, Jones, Patrick, & Pasini-Hill, 2003; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003; Hindman, 1988).

Not surprisingly, those surveyed demonstrated a punitive attitude toward sex offenders, recommending that, on average, sex criminals should serve about 39

years in prison and 42 years on probation. Notably, the most frequent response was 99 years—the largest number that fit into the two-digit box on their answer forms. Despite their doubts about treatment effectiveness, respondents also suggested long periods of treatment both in prison and in community settings. Perhaps they believed that treatment could not hurt, even if they were not optimistic that it would help. Given the skepticism many people have about sex offender treatment, and the overwhelming movement toward implementation of residence restrictions nationwide, it was also somewhat incongruous that participants thought treatment to be more effective than restricting where sex offenders can live. Perhaps most disconcerting was the revelation that the majority of participants would continue to support community protection policies even if their effectiveness remained unproven.

Finally, it is noteworthy that there were few statistically significant differences between males and females and between parents and non-parents. There were no differences at all between those who identified themselves as sexually abused in childhood and those who did not. However, sexual abuse was not specifically defined in this survey, and it is possible that not all individuals who experienced sexual contact with an adult prior to age 15 considered themselves to be abuse victims. In general, disdain for and fear of sex offenders appears to be relatively equal between groups, even though we might surmise that individuals differ in their feelings of personal vulnerability.

### *Implications for Policy Development*

In sum, these data have important implications for public policy. Our hypothesis that the public is poorly informed about sex offenders was supported. Specifically, myths of extraordinarily high recidivism rates and “stranger danger” prevail, and the public appears to view all sex offenders as posing a similar threat to communities. These widespread beliefs perpetuate the development of increasingly restrictive policies as politicians endeavor to serve their constituents. In actuality, sex offenders represent a diversity of offense patterns and a wide range of risk for reoffense (Doren, 1998; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Prentky et al., 1997). As a result, one-size-fits-all policies are not likely to be cost efficient, nor are they likely to afford maximum protection to the public. In particular, broad policies that include low-risk, nonviolent, and statutory offenders can drain public resources while unnecessarily disrupting the stability of some offenders and diminishing their likelihood of successful reintegration (Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000; LaFond, 2005; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Petersilia, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz et al., 2000b). According to the Center for Sex Offender Management (2002) (operated under a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice), prevention of sexual violence requires the development of policies based on empirical research, and limited

resources would be better spent if the most restrictive policies were reserved for those who are likely to pose the greatest danger (Hanson, 1998). Some have argued that failing to apply social science data to inform the development of social policy is not only inefficient, but unethical (Grove & Meehl, 1996).

Specifically, states should develop procedures for assessing risk using empirically derived risk factors and tools that have demonstrated predictive validity and reliability (e.g., *Static-99*) (Hanson & Thornton, 1999). Offense-based classification, such as that initiated in the recently passed federal guidelines (“Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006,” 2006), is unlikely to be as useful as risk-based categorical systems. Factors associated with sex offense recidivism have been identified through research (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005) and have been incorporated into the development of actuarial risk assessment instruments. Such tools estimate the probability of sexual reoffense based on actual recidivism rates of other convicted sex offenders with similar characteristics (Epperson et al., 1999a; Hanson, 1997; Hanson & Thornton, 1999; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). Though they cannot predict that a specific individual will or will not reoffend, risk assessment instruments are useful for screening offenders into relative risk categories (Barbaree, Seto, Langton, & Peacock, 2001; Epperson et al., 1999b; Hanson, 1997; Hanson & Thornton, 1999, 2000; Harris et al., 2003; Quinsey et al., 1998)

By using risk assessment to identify the most dangerous offenders, supervision and management strategies can be concordant with the level of threat that an offender poses to a community. Risk-based registration and notification policies allow for more efficient use of resources by identifying those who require intense monitoring, treatment, and restrictions while minimizing disruption of stability for lower-risk offenders and their families. Evidence-based management and treatment practices include actuarial risk assessment (Hanson, 1997; Hanson & Thornton, 1999), containment models (a collaborative approach to probationary supervision and treatment) (English, Pullen, & Jones, 1996), and cognitive-behavioral interventions (Hanson et al., 2002; Losel & Schmucker, 2005). Information disclosed to the public should be carefully considered with regard to its potential for enhancing community protection (e.g., offense descriptions, victim age and gender preference), and should not include information which may hinder successful reintegration while providing little potential benefit to public safety (e.g., employment, phone number).

The media should be enlisted as a partner in educating the public about sexual abuse through the dissemination of accurate and research-based information about sexual violence, sexual perpetrators, and victimization. Rather than sensationalistic journalism, the public would benefit from factual information about recidivism rates, the heterogeneity of sex offenders, the signs and symptoms of sexual abuse, and the common types of grooming behaviors used by perpetrators who gain access to victims by using their positions of familiarity, trust, or authority. The media is clearly influential in shaping public opinion, which affects

the development of social policy in this particular arena (Sample, 2001; Sample & Kadleck, 2006). Research has shown that exposure to accurate information can facilitate attitudinal changes about important social issues (Cochran & Chamlin, 2005).

The present study did have some limitations. Data were collected from only one county in Florida, and the results may not be generalizable to other regions of the country or even to other parts of the state. Moreover, the data were collected from the DMV offices in which people were waiting to obtain or renew drivers' licenses. This method was used to attempt to obtain a representative sample. However, the method may have inadvertently led to a biased sample, as those with driver's licenses may be a different group from those without licenses. Additionally, those who could not read English were excluded. DMV samples probably include disproportionate numbers of people recently relocated to Florida, which likely impacted the sample's familiarity with local community notification procedures. In retrospect, there were some questions that went unasked, such as the public's use of Internet sex offender registry websites. It might have been enlightening to understand how often citizens use online resources to search for sex offenders, and under what circumstances they are likely to do so.

Fuselier et al. (2002) advised that correcting public perceptions and debunking myths about sex offenders could enhance public education and prevention efforts. Future research should investigate the effects of exposure to more accurate information about sex offenders on public opinions about sex offender legislation, similar to studies conducted regarding death penalty attitudes (Cochran & Chamlin, 2005). Media outlets might take note of the inaccuracies that are rampant in the public's perception. The promulgation of more accurate and informed journalism could assist in promoting a more evidence-based approach to the development of community protection policies for reducing sexual violence.

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