

Exploring Public Awareness and Attitudes about Sex Offender Management: Findings from a National Public Opinion Poll

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Introduction

Managing sex offenders effectively is among the key public policy interests and priorities among lawmakers and the constituents they represent.¹ State and national lawmaking bodies throughout the country have enacted large numbers of sex offender-specific laws in a relatively short period of time, primarily to increase mandatory prison sentences, provide for closer tracking and monitoring, and increase restrictions and sanctions.² However, evidence regarding the impact and effectiveness of many of these laws and policies is limited. Furthermore, while these laws presumably reflect public demand and interests, relatively little is known about the public's awareness and attitudes about these policies.

This document highlights the findings from a national public opinion poll that was designed to provide further insights into public awareness and perceptions pertaining to these issues.

Survey Design and Methodology

A project team from the Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM) developed an initial pool of items intended to explore the extent to which public knowledge and assumptions about sex offenders and the effectiveness of sex offender management align with current research, and the relative value or influence that research findings may have on public attitudes toward sex offender management policies. For the purpose of this poll, "sex offender" was defined as "someone who has been convicted of one or more sex crimes involving physical contact, such as molesting a child or raping an adult."

The draft survey was reviewed by a panel of external consultants with expertise in sex offender

management and sexual abuse prevention to assist with maximizing the precision of the items and response options, minimizing perceived bias, and ensuring that the scope of the survey would offer a meaningful contribution to the literature. Based on this feedback, a revised version was subsequently piloted with a small convenience sample to identify and resolve any recurring themes (e.g., lack of clarity) that had the potential to impact the interpretability and practical utility of the findings.

The survey instrument and accompanying polling scripts were finalized in collaboration with an internationally recognized polling firm that conducted the telephone poll via random selection from a nationally listed sample, using a strategy in which selection probabilities are proportional to population size within area codes and exchanges.³ Administration of the survey occurred in February and March of 2010 and resulted in a total sample size of 1,005 respondents who, based on the sampling strategies, key demographics, and other population characteristics, were presumed to be largely representative of community members.⁴

Findings

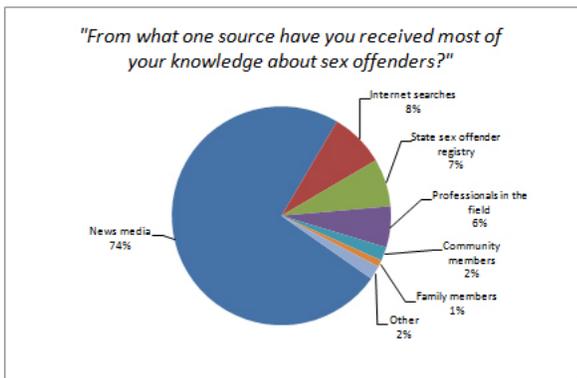
In the sections that follow, the results are presented in related clusters of items and, when practical, within the context of relevant contemporary research and literature.⁵

Primary Source of Public Knowledge and Information about Sex Offenders

The media is well-recognized as having an influential role in shaping public perceptions, knowledge, attitudes and opinions. Studies indicate that extensive media attention about sex crimes is a primary

vehicle for providing the public and lawmakers with information about sexual victimization, the individuals who commit such crimes, various sex offender management strategies, and sexual abuse prevention.⁶

In the current poll, the clear majority of respondents (74%) reported that the news media was the predominant source from which they received most of their information and knowledge about sex offenders. Only small fractions of the sample reported that Internet searches, sex offender registries, professionals in the field, community members, or family members were the key source of their information about sex offenders.



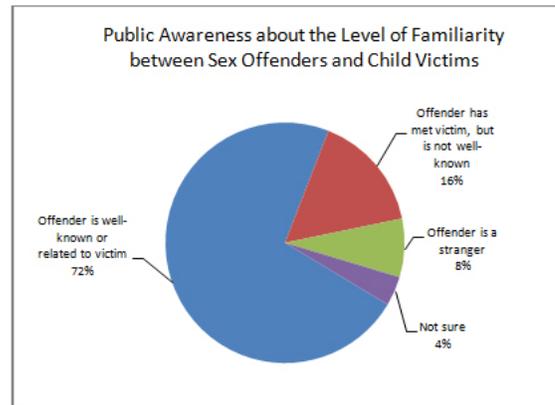
Media portrayals of sex crimes and the individuals who commit these offenses are not always grounded in current statistics, research, and accurate information which, in turn, can create perceptions, expectations, and demands for public policies that may not be well-informed and which may not result in the desired outcomes.⁷ Indeed, many sex offender-specific laws have been developed in reaction to individual cases that generate attention and debate at state and national levels, and which often involve the abduction, sexual assault, and murder of children committed by repeat sex offenders who were not known to the victims or their families.⁸

Those specific crimes statistically represent only a very small fraction of all sex crimes and other violent crimes that come to the attention of the authorities, and the victim-offender relationship is not typical of most sex offenses.⁹ Nonetheless, such cases often serve as a catalyst for sweeping legislative reforms that are based on underlying premises that victimization is most likely to be committed by persons unknown to the victims and that sex offenders reoffend at exceptionally high rates with progressively more violent crimes. The current poll was in part geared toward assessing the public's knowledge and perceptions relative to those

fundamental issues about sex offenders.

Perceptions about the Relative Risk of Stranger-Perpetrated Sex Offenses against Children

The overwhelming majority (88%) of the respondents in the current poll recognized that sex crimes against children generally involve perpetrators that are related to or otherwise known to the victim.



This finding, coupled with congruent results from other recent surveys,¹⁰ suggests that the public largely recognizes that stranger-perpetrated sex offenses are relatively uncommon, and provides evidence that dedicated public education strategies have increased awareness in this respect. Whether such awareness translates into public support for laws or policies that are less exclusively focused on statistically uncommon – but certainly tragic and impactful – cases is yet to be determined.

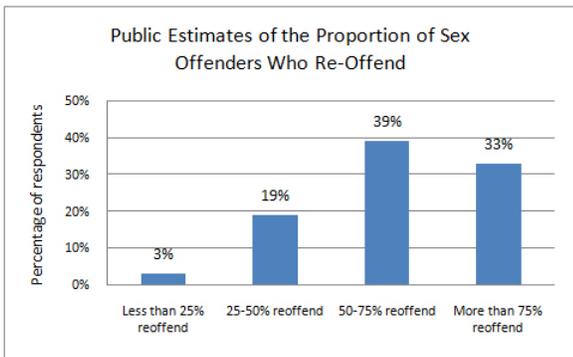
Assumptions about Reoffending among Sex Offenders

Without question, public demands for stringent sanctions, long prison terms, intensive monitoring, and other community protection measures are influenced by beliefs about the potential for sex offenders to reoffend. Determining the “true” recidivism rate for convicted sex offenders is hampered by under-reporting and under-detection, but the available data indicates that roughly 15-30% of adult sex offenders are known to recidivate, as measured by rearrest and/or reconviction, during follow-up periods of 5-15 years.¹¹

The findings of the current poll indicate that the public believes sexual reoffense rates are markedly higher. The majority of the respondents (72%) presumed that at least half, if not most, convicted sex offenders will commit additional sex crimes in the future. Indeed,

one-third (33%) held the belief that 75% or more will reoffend. Women were more likely than men to believe that greater proportions of sex offenders recidivate, as were respondents who were 65 years of age or older, in comparison to their younger counterparts.

In addition, well over half of this national sample (60%) believed that sex offenders who commit new crimes are most likely to perpetrate another, similar sex offense. One third (33%) were of the opinion that, if sex offenders recidivate, they are most likely to engage in criminal conduct that is more serious and violent than their prior offenses. These perceptions do not comport with research that indicates that sex offenders are more apt to be rearrested or reconvicted for non-sexual, non-violent crimes than for additional sex offenses.¹²

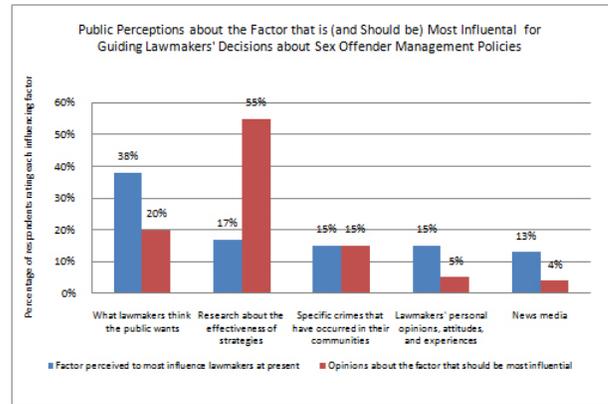


Opinions about Factors Influencing Sex Offender-Specific Policy Development

A number of factors influence decisionmaking among lawmakers, including pressure from constituents, information from various individuals and sources (e.g., victim advocates, victims and their families, researchers, criminal justice professionals, the news media), specific crimes that occur in their communities, and their own personal beliefs and experiences. Some of these factors are more likely than others to facilitate the development of well-informed laws that have the potential to result in the desired public safety outcomes.

In the current poll, respondents were asked to select, from a range of options, the factor that they believed should have the greatest influence in guiding lawmakers' decisions about sex offender-specific policies. Research that differentiates effective from ineffective strategies was most frequently endorsed; 55% selected this factor over influences such as what lawmakers believe the public wants (20%), specific

crimes that have occurred in their communities (15%), their own personal opinions and experiences (5%), and the news media (4%). The public's expectations in this regard did not vary as a function of sample characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, educational attainment, or political affiliation.



At the same time, however, the current findings suggest that members of the public are not confident that lawmakers currently prioritize the “what works” research to inform sex offender management policy decisions. Indeed, only 17% believed that research is currently a primary driving influence for lawmakers. The largest proportion of respondents (38%) held the opinion that lawmakers rely most on what they believe the public wants; the remaining respondents were fairly evenly divided among factors such as research, lawmakers' own personal opinions and attitudes, specific crimes that have occurred in their communities, and the news media as being the predominant influence for lawmakers.

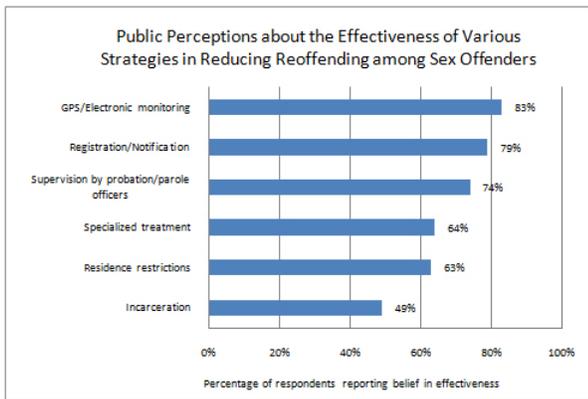
It is noteworthy that lawmakers themselves report that they rely heavily on media reports and their personal opinions and attitudes when considering sex offender-specific policies.¹³

Perceived Effectiveness of Common Sex Offender Management Policies and Practices

The most prevalent laws and policies designed to manage and reduce the risk posed by sex offenders and prevent future victimization address mandatory prison terms, intensive supervision and monitoring, specialized treatment interventions, registration and community notification, and restrictions on where sex offenders can reside.¹⁴ The effectiveness of many of these sex offender-specific strategies has not yet been established by research. Moreover, studies exploring the impact and effectiveness of some of these approaches provide evidence of ineffectiveness and an

increased potential for collateral consequences that run counter to the desired impact.

Findings from the current national poll suggests that the public has a fairly high level of confidence in the effectiveness of many of these common approaches in reducing reoffending among sex offenders, with the notable exception of incarceration.



- **GPS/Electronic Monitoring.** The overwhelming majority (82%) of this sample of the public considered GPS/electronic monitoring to be an effective method for reducing recidivism among sex offenders. While these technologies offer the ability to track offenders' whereabouts, research fails to indicate that such technologies systematically reduce the likelihood that sex offenders will reoffend.¹⁵
- **Registration/Notification.** Most respondents (79%) shared the opinion that recidivism is reduced by making information about sex offenders publicly available. However, research on the impact and effectiveness of sex offender registration and notification has yielded mixed findings; some studies suggest the potential for a risk-reducing or deterrent effect, while others have not demonstrated such a link.¹⁶
- **Probation/Parole Supervision.** The majority (74%) indicated their belief that assigning probation/parole officers to supervise sex offenders in the community lowers recidivism. Research demonstrates that outcomes vary as a function of the supervision approach utilized; approaches that are primarily monitoring and sanctions-focused tend not to reduce recidivism, whereas supervision approaches that include treatment interventions reduce recidivism significantly.¹⁷

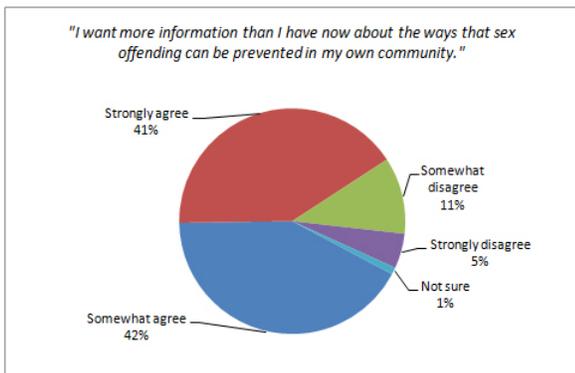
- **Specialized Treatment.** Nearly two-thirds (64%) of this national sample expressed a belief that providing specialized treatment reduces the likelihood that sex offenders will commit additional sex crimes in the future. Experts continue to debate the extent to which sex offender-specific treatment impacts recidivism, but the cumulative research indicates that sex offenders who receive contemporary treatment recidivate at lower rates than those who do not receive such treatment.¹⁸

- **Residence Restrictions.** A similar proportion (63%) held the opinion that restricting sex offenders from living near schools, parks, or other places where children might gather is an effective risk-reduction measure, with 20% of the respondents perceiving such restrictions to be "very effective." To date, researchers have not established a link between sex offending and residential proximity to these types of locations; nor does the available research indicate that residence restrictions reduce the likelihood of re-offending.¹⁹
- **Incarceration.** The surveyed public was evenly split regarding their beliefs about whether serving time in prison reduces recidivism among sex offenders post-release. Incarceration may meet retributive goals and incapacitation interests, but its value as a risk-reducing intervention is not demonstrated by research.²⁰ And particularly germane to the trends toward increasing mandating minimum prison terms for sex offenders, empirical evidence does not indicate that longer periods of incarceration result in lower rates of recidivism following their release.²¹

Across many of these strategies – including the use of prison – political affiliation had little to no effect on respondents' views about the effectiveness.

These findings collectively suggest that many members of the public believe that strategies can be put into place to mitigate or manage risk posed by sex offenders. At the same time, the results indicate a need for additional efforts to educate the public about what can be reasonably expected from these strategies in light of the existing research, or lack thereof, particularly from a costs and benefits perspective, in order to minimize the potential for a false sense of security.

Given their desire for lawmakers to rely on research to guide sex offender-specific policy development, the public may be similarly interested in learning about the current research themselves in order to ensure that they can make informed decisions about the types of laws and policies for which they should provide support and advocacy as a means of promoting safety in their communities. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents (83%) expressed a desire for more information than they currently have regarding how to prevent sex offending in their communities. The question is whether receiving such information will have an appreciable influence on their attitudes, opinions, actions, or support.



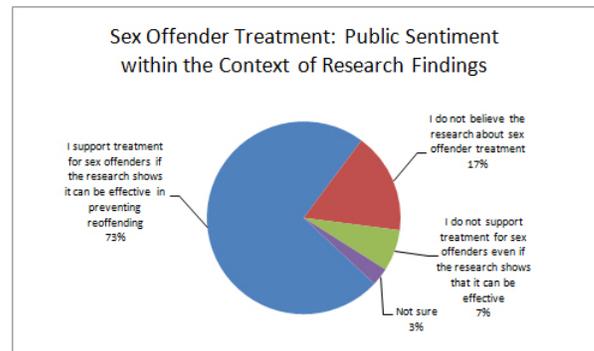
Attitudes about Sex Offender Management Policies in Relation to Research Findings

A well-informed public is better equipped to support and advocate for well-informed policies. At the same time, as is true for lawmakers and other public officials, subjective factors (e.g., personal beliefs and experiences) are influential – and, in some cases, are more important – than objective research data in shaping the public’s attitudes about, interests in, and support for specific approaches for managing sex offenders. As highlighted below, exposure to research findings, albeit on a very limited basis, appear to have varying degrees of influence on public attitudes and opinions.

- Specialized sex offender treatment.** When presented with a brief contextual statement regarding research on treatment outcomes (i.e., “Some research demonstrates that treatment designed specifically to prevent sexual reoffending can be effective”), the majority of the surveyed public (74%) expressed their willingness to support sex offender treatment. Of the remaining respondents, 7% indicated that they would not

support treatment regardless of the research. Perhaps most interestingly, 17% of the respondents indicated that they do not believe the research findings pertaining to treatment outcomes for sex offenders.

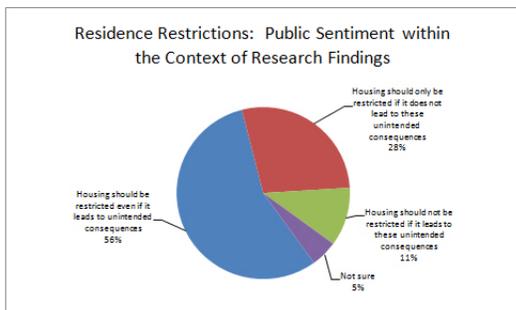
Factors such as respondents’ age, gender, geographical location, and political affiliation were not linked to their attitudes or support for sex offender treatment.



- Intensive supervision in the community.** The pollers also read a brief statement to the respondents regarding the evidence-based principle of risk-based supervision strategies, which indicates that supervision is most effective when the intensity is commensurate with offenders’ assessed levels of risk (i.e., intensive supervision for higher risk offenders, less intensive supervision for offenders posing a lower risk).²² Approximately half (47%) nonetheless expressed the opinion that all sex offenders should be supervised intensively regardless of their risk to reoffend. Women tended to be more likely than men to endorse the practice of intensive supervision for all sex offenders in the community, whereas men tended to support risk-based levels of supervisions. Individuals 65 years of age or older were more prone than younger cohorts to favor intensive supervision for all sex offenders.
- Residence restrictions.** Restricting locations where sex offenders can reside has not been demonstrated to reduce recidivism, and a growing body of evidence suggests the potential for such restrictions to be linked paradoxically to risk-increasing factors.²³ These may include making sex offenders harder to monitor, removing sex offenders from positive

social supports, or decreasing their likelihood of securing employment. Respondents were provided information to this effect and then asked to indicate the extent to which they supported residence restrictions in light of such research. Many (39%) were not inclined to support these residence restrictions given the potential for unintended, risk-increasing aftereffects. However, over half (56%) indicated that they support residence restrictions for sex offenders regardless of the collateral consequences identified by researchers.

Interestingly, respondents residing in the Western region of the United States were more inclined than residents in other regions to support residence restrictions regardless of the demonstrated potential for risk-increasing consequences; those in the South were more apt to endorse such restrictions, only if they did not result in risk-increasing aftereffects. Political affiliation also appeared to be associated with support for imposing restrictions on where sex offenders can reside. Republicans were more likely to endorse residence restrictions regardless of the potential for collateral consequences, whereas Democrats tended to indicate support for residence restrictions only in the absence of this potential.



- Incarceration.** Half of the surveyed participants did not believe that serving time in prison reduces sex offenders' risk for committing additional sex crimes in the future. Nearly half (48%) indicated that they would be more apt to support alternatives to prison for sex offenders if research demonstrated their effectiveness. Another 43% reported that such research findings would not impact their opinions about alternatives to prison, and the 9% remaining were uncertain about

whether their opinions would be impacted by research on effective alternatives to prison. Republicans were more likely than Independents or Democrats to indicate that their views about prison alternatives would not be impacted by research that demonstrated such options were more effective in reducing recidivism.

- Juvenile-specific strategies.** Exploring public knowledge and attitudes regarding juveniles who have committed sex offenses was outside of the primary scope of the current public opinion poll. However, to develop some preliminary insights in this regard, pollsters read respondents the following contextual statement about this subpopulation: "Some research shows that there are important differences between adults and teenagers who commit sex offenses, such as their offending patterns and risk to reoffend."

Sixty percent of the respondents (60%) expressed the opinion that laws regarding sex offenses should take into account the identified differences between juveniles and adults who commit these crimes. More than one-third (36%) indicated that the laws pertaining to sex crimes should be the same regardless of the differences between these subpopulations. The latter findings may be, at least in part, because of their belief that many juveniles will reoffend as adults. Indeed, a large proportion of the surveyed sample (66%) estimated that more than 25% of juvenile sex offenders will commit sex offenses as adults, with 36% believing that between 50-100% of juvenile sex offenders will reoffend as adults. This far exceeds the 5-15% figures commonly cited by researchers.²⁴

Overall, the relationship is unclear regarding exposure to research-based information and the apparently steadfast nature of some of the respondents' attitudes and support regarding various sex offender management strategies. Interestingly, in one previous public opinion survey, respondents indicated that they would continue to support specific laws about sex offenders even if research does not demonstrate that such laws are effective.²⁵

Conclusion

The abundance of sex offender-specific legislation that has been enacted over the past several years suggests that public concerns about these cases – and their demands for additional safeguards and accountability measures – remain high. The findings from the present national poll provide new insights into public awareness, attitudes, opinions, and expectations regarding sex offenders and offender management strategies, and highlight a number of research, policy, and practice implications.

Overall, the results indicate that, although community members hold some beliefs that align with current research about sex offenders and various sex offender management strategies, they also have several misperceptions that can potentially impact their expectations and support for policies that are not likely to result in their intended public safety outcomes. These identified information gaps, coupled with the public's stated desires for more information about how sexual victimization can be prevented, indicate the need for ongoing public education and engagement strategies. In addition, confirmation of the media's strong role in providing information about sex offenders highlights the importance of engaging the media as a key partner in such efforts, with a goal of promoting awareness, support, and advocacy for well-informed laws and policies that have the greatest potential for enhancing public safety.

The results also suggest that while the public expects research to guide sex offender-specific policy development, questions remain about the extent to which receiving such information actually influences the attitudes and actions of policymakers or the constituents they represent. Additional studies of the interaction of these variables are needed. Also important are further exploration and evaluations of the ways in which established models of facilitating changes in public awareness, attitudes, and behaviors in other key public health domains can be applied effectively to sex offender management and sexual abuse prevention arenas.

Finally, the current findings, consistent with other surveys of community members, offer evidence that the public's interests are not limited solely to retribution, incapacitation, and risk management for sex offenders, but that they also tend to support interventions that contribute to risk-reduction and primary prevention.²⁶ Therefore, dedicated steps

must be taken to enhance lawmakers' awareness and understandings of the importance of these elements within a comprehensive approach to managing sex offenders, such that effective treatment and prevention strategies to address this critical issue receive policy and funding considerations.

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3 Zogby International was commissioned by the Center for Sex Offender Management to execute the polling process and conduct the statistical analyses.

4 The final survey items, as well as the characteristics of the population sample, can be provided upon request to the Center for Sex Offender Management via www.csom.org.

5 For simplicity of presentation and ease of reading in this document, the specific wording of some of the survey questions and response options have been abbreviated or otherwise modified slightly, while preserving the original intent/integrity of those items.

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25 Levenson et al., 2007.

26 See, e.g., Ameck et al., 2010; Katz-Schiavone, S., & Jeglic, E.L. (2008). Public perception of sex offender social policies and the impact on sex offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*; Levenson et al., 2007; and Mears et al., 2008.

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