Public opinion and perceptions exert considerable influence on shaping the political discourse and policy landscape surrounding societal responses to sexual offending. In particular, prevailing cultural narratives and beliefs have played a significant role in the development of policies in recent decades that expand monitoring and control of sex offenders in the community. Accordingly, improved understanding of the nature and correlates of public beliefs and attitudes can be instrumental in crafting effective public education messages and in formulating policy advocacy strategies related to social responses to sexual violence.

Since the 1990s, dozens of studies (of varying quality) have surveyed members of the public about their attitudes and beliefs systems surrounding sexual violence, those who have perpetrated sexual offenses, and the perceived efficacy of public policy strategies. This symposium will offer historical and critical perspective on this body of research, present findings from recent studies conducted across multiple countries, and chart a course for future research in this area.

Symposium Format

The session will begin with two 15-minute presentations. The first, by Professor Lisa Sample (University of Nebraska, USA), will offer a historical overview of public opinion research on sexual offending and place this research into the context of public policy. The second, by Professor Todd Hogue (University of Lincoln, UK), will discuss the evolution of and validity of structured scales used for evaluating public perceptions and beliefs.

Next, a series of five “lightning talks” of between 7-9 minutes each will showcase and highlight emerging international research in this area, presenting results from public surveys conducted in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and New Zealand. Presenters and topics for the lightning talks will be as follows:

⇒ Sandy Jung (MacEwan University, Canada) – Facilitating Community Support for Empirically-Supported Sex Offender Policies
⇒ Craig Harper (University of Lincoln, UK) – Moral Disengagement in UK Public Discourse around Sexual Offending
⇒ Andrew J. Harris (University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA) - What’s in a Name?
Evaluating the Effects of the “Sex Offender” Label on Public Opinion and Beliefs

⇒ Kelly Socia (University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA) - Evaluating public perceptions of sex offender risk: Political, religious, and demographic correlates
⇒ Gwenda Willis (University of Auckland, New Zealand) - How can we influence public perceptions of individuals who have sexually abused?

The symposium will conclude with a discussion and Q&A session focused on applying this research to policy, public education, and community engagement, and on charting a course for future study and inquiry.

ABSTRACTS FOR SYMPOSIUM TALKS

As noted in the session description, the symposium will open with two 15-minute presentations that will offer historical and critical perspective related to public opinion research on sexual violence and sex offender policy. Abstracts for these two sessions are provided below. The titles and topics for the ensuing “lightning talks” are provided in the general session abstract.

Research on Public Perceptions and Opinions of Sex Offenders, Offending, and Laws, and its Relation to Policy

Lisa L. Sample, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska Omaha (USA)

Scholars generally agree that public perception and opinion play an influential role in the passage and content of sex offender policy. Sex offender laws passed in the 1980s and 1990s were mostly driven by media accounts and legislative testimony. Policy makers had little data that directly measured citizen’ perceptions of sex offenders or their opinions concerning the need for sex offender reforms or the utility of those reforms. This presentation highlights the evolution of scholarly inquiry into public opinions and perceptions of sex offenders, offending, and laws, and explores how this information can be applied to better understand policy outcomes and better manage sex offenders in the community.
A Review: Evaluating Public Perceptions and Beliefs about “Sexual Offenders”

Todd E. Hogue, Ph.D.
University of Lincoln (UK)

Sexual offenders are one of the few social groups where it can be seen as socially acceptable to be openly hostile, pejorative and disparaging. They are disproportionately reported in the media and fear of future offending has driven the implementation of community notification and registration systems around the globe. As such, individual differences in attitudes toward sexual offenders are likely to have a significant impact on decision making. Within community contexts, differences in attitudes have been shown to be related to how safe people feel and their willingness to support community reintegration and rehabilitation programmes. While in forensic settings, attitudes might impact on judgments of risk and therapeutic alliance. This paper presents a systematic review of those studies using structured scales to measure attitudes towards sexual offenders including the Attitudes toward Sex Offenders Scale (ATS) and the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (CATSO). We critique the validity of such measures and suggest how such measures should be used and developed to more effectively understand the impact of differing attitudes toward sexual offenders.

Goals of the Symposium:
By the conclusion of this session, attendees will have gained:
1. Improved understanding of the evolution of research evaluating public attitudes and beliefs surrounding perpetrators of sexual violence and prevailing sex offender management policies;
2. Enhanced ability to critically evaluate research evaluating public opinions and beliefs surrounding sexual violence and to recognize methodological challenges and limitations;
3. Expanded awareness of the emerging research in this area and how it may be applied to policy advocacy and community engagement.