Perceptions and Judgements Regarding Sexual Offenders, Offenses, Policies, and Sentencing

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This symposium focuses on the various ways that individuals make decisions regarding sex offender perception, policy support, and sentencing decisions. The first presentation explores how members of the North Carolina public perceive and utilize information about sex offenders and sex offender management strategies in relation to awareness, risk perception, and policy support. Of particular interest is how individual backgrounds influence perceptions, particularly in terms of backgrounds that are orientated towards victim services, offender services, and law enforcement, as compared with the general public. The second presentation describes the various legal and extra-legal influencers of sex offender sentencing decisions over the course of a seven-year period in Pennsylvania. In particular, the influencers of sentencing decisions are compared between sexual and non-sexual violent offenders, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how judicial perceptions of sex offenders influence sentencing decisions. The third and final presentation explores how the public perception of sex offenders and sexual offending is influenced through the use of labeling. In particular, labels are explored in terms of their influence on engagement with information about sexual offending as well as support for punitive policies.

Perceptions of Sex Offender Policies in North Carolina

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Citizens have been a major force in the creation and implementation of sex offender policies (Finkelhor, 2009; LaFond, 2005). Since these policies have often been created, in theory, to provide citizens with more tools to protect themselves (Finkelhor, 2009; LaFond, 2005), it is important to understand how citizens perceive and utilize these policies once passed. While some research has examined how discrete groups of citizens view these policies, there are few studies that examine how different backgrounds may influence citizens’ perceptions.
This study examines the perceptions of 394 participants in North Carolina, recruited via a snowball sampling method. The influence of background (victim, offender, law enforcement-oriented) is explored to see how this is associated with knowledge and perceptions of sex offender policies. The current study was guided by three research questions: 1) What characteristics predict knowledge of various sex offender policies in the community? 2) What characteristics predict risk perception of potential sexual abusers? 3) What characteristics predict perception of policy effectiveness?

Learning Goals and Objectives:

- Present what characteristics predict knowledge of various SO management strategies in the community. Participants will be able to identify at least 2 characteristics that predict knowledge of various SO management strategies.
- Communicate what characteristics predict risk perception of potential child sexual abusers. Participants will be able to identify at least 2 characteristics that predict risk perception.
- Describe what characteristics predict perception of policy effectiveness. Participants will be able to identify at least 2 characteristics predict perception of policy effectiveness.

Examining the Correlates of Sentence Severity for Convicted Sex Offenders

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Research on the criminal justice response to sexual offenders has mainly focused on the period following incarceration, with relatively less attention towards formal responses prior to incarceration, such as the sentencing decision. Further, criminological research on variation in sentencing outcomes has combined sex offenders with other violent offenders, leaving knowledge of the correlates of sentence severity among this group under developed. This research seeks to develop knowledge by comparing variation in sentencing outcomes (i.e., the decision to incarcerate and sentence length) between sexual and violent offenders convicted in Pennsylvania courts over a seven-year period (N ~ 49,000). Findings will detail how legal (e.g., offense severity, prior criminal record, victim age) and extra-legal (e.g., age, sex, race) factors are associated with sentencing outcomes for sex offenders, whether and how these associations compare with violent, non-sexual offenders, and how the salience of these factors varies across the distribution of sentence lengths. Implications regarding judicial perceptions of sexual offenders will be discussed.
Learning Goals and Objectives:

- Examine the association between legal / extra-legal factors and variation in sentencing outcomes for sexual offenders (i.e., the decision to incarcerate and the length of sentence). Participants will be able to identify the legal and extra-legal factors that influence sentence severity for sexual offenders.
- Compare and contrast the effects of legal / extra-legal factors on sentencing outcomes between sexual and violent, non-sexual offenders. Participants will be able to identify the points of departure between sexual and non-violent sexual offenders in regards to these outcomes.
- Examine and compare variation in these associations across the distribution of sentence lengths (e.g., the effect of prior record for those receiving the shortest sentences, compared to those receiving the longest sentences). Participants will be able to identify how the salience of these factors vary between the shortest and the longest sentences.

Representativeness in the Processing and Judgment of Sexual Crime

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“Sexual offenders” are a highly heterogeneous group. However, when asked to make judgments about this group of offenders, members of the general public are thought to imagine the media-proliferated stereotypical image of a predatory adult sexual offender. That is, the lay public do not see the variation among this group of offenders, but rather form opinions and judgments by consulting a sensationalized and highly emotive mental exemplar. This view of decision-making is consistent with the tenets of Tversky and Kahneman’s (1973) seminal work on the representativeness heuristic.

In this talk, we describe a study that empirically examines the role of the representativeness heuristic in the processing of sexual crime case information, and associated policy-relevant decision-making. In a lab-based study, we used a cognitive load induction to reduce the availability of participants’ cognitive resources and encourage them to rely on implicit attitudes and stereotypes when making judgments. Results from various outcome variables (incorporating both explicit and implicit measurement procedures) demonstrate that non-conscious representative exemplars of who “sexual offenders” are can have serious implications for how people engage with information related to sexual offending, and support for punitive public policies. These data will be discussed within the context of media reporting about sexual offending, with an explication
about how we may be able to use heuristics in order to promote more progressive discourses in this area.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**

- Outline the representativeness heuristic and its relevance to judgments about sexual offenders. Participants will be able to understand the importance of considering heuristic cognition in responses to sexual offending.
- Understand the importance of considering non-conscious information processing in making sense of sexual crime discourse. Participants will be able to target non-conscious processes when communicating about sexual offending.
- Introduce novel methods of assessing implicit attitudes towards sexual offenders. Participants will be able to appreciate the potential utility of combining self-report and indirect measures of attitudes in their work.