

**Getting Lucky or Getting Abused:
A Content Analysis of Public Comments on News Articles About Sexual Abuse**

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This project examines public comments responding to online news articles involving teenage minor victims (age 13-17) who were sexually assaulted by adults. Of particular interest is the public response to cases involving student/teacher sexual relationships. The underlying focus on the analysis is whether the gender of the perpetrator and/or the victim play a role in predicting the public reactions to the article, as demonstrated by the public comments.

The main research question is whether public responses to cases of sexual assault published in online media differ based on the gender makeup of the perpetrator/victim dyad (i.e., male-on-female; male-on-male; female-on-female; female-on-male). We hypothesize that user comments will be the most *supportive/encouraging* of sexual abuse incidents occurring between teenage male victims and young adult female perpetrators. Conversely, we expect user comments to be the most *negative/punitive* towards sexual abuse incidents involving male perpetrators, regardless of the sex of the victim.

Our data come from a broad search of online-accessible news articles posted to news/media websites that allow user comments to be posted in response to the article in question. The timeframe for our search covered U.S.-based cases in news stories published online between January 1st, 2009 through December 31st, 2019. Our analysis involved qualitatively coding the articles and user comments using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), based in a grounded theory perspective (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, we also employed a coding scheme that includes sensitizing concepts (see Blumer, 1954), based on prior research findings regarding public perceptions of sexual abuse.

We will present results that isolate the unique contribution that the perpetrator/victim gender dyad has on public reactions to such stories. Further, we will explore how and why these differences matter when it comes to processing such cases in the criminal justice system, and what the implications are for victimization, reporting, and sentencing outcomes.

Kelly M. Socia, PhD is an Associate Professor in the School of Criminology and Justice Studies and a Fellow for the Center for Public Opinion at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. He has over thirty peer-reviewed publications in journals such as *Criminology & Public Policy*; *Justice Quarterly*; and *Sex Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. He has served as co-Editor of Sex Offender Law Report, co-wrote an Oxford Bibliography entry on Sex Offender Policy and Legislation, and has consulted on court cases involving the housing impacts of residency restrictions. His research interests include registered citizens and public policies, reentry and recidivism, public opinion and policy-making, and spatial analyses. He received his Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the School of Criminal Justice at the University at Albany, State University of New York.