Canadian Attitudes towards Sex Offender Treatment and Sex Offender Policy

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Sexual violence has devastating negative consequences for victims and their families, but research has shown that programs aimed at risk factors (such as lack of social supports, stable housing and employment) can reduce sexual re-offending, and that these risk factors are influenced by community attitudes and public policies. Understanding the attitudes of the public is essential to the development of workable sex offender policies. Insofar as connections to the community are important to desistance (i.e. through employment, housing, relationships, etc.), community members are the final gatekeepers to many positive risk-relevant opportunities. Although it has been argued that current sex offender policy is justified at least partially by the fact that the public demands or supports stricter responses to sex offenders, this is merely an assumption and Canadian research in this area is scant. This presentation examines Canadian attitudes towards sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and the relationship between attitudes and support for particular sex offender policies (both evidence based and non-evidenced based).

In this study, 350 university student participants were surveyed regarding their attitudes towards adult contact sex offenders. Specifically, participants were surveyed regarding their feelings towards sex offenders, their attitudes towards sex offender treatment, and their support of different sex offender policies (including actual policies used in Canada, others are policies used elsewhere and potential policies not yet in use). An examination of particular evidence based and non-evidence based policy endorsement was conducted.

While the results indicated that a majority of the participants had negative feelings towards sex offenders, a majority also endorsed more neutral attitudes (neither rehabilitative or conservative/punitive) regarding sex offenders and sex offender treatment. Furthermore, one’s attitudes towards sex offenders were found to be predictive of the number of both evidence based, and number of non-evidenced based policies that one endorsed. That is, more punitive attitudes were related to endorsement of more non-evidence based policies, and to the endorsement of fewer evidence-based policies; this relationship was also found in the reverse.

The majority of participants endorsed a number of both evidence-based as well as non-evidenced based sex offender policies. Participants were in favor of rehabilitative policies both in prison and in the community such as: providing therapy, stable housing and job assistance, volunteer and leisure/recreational options, Circles Of Support and Accountability, and additional support in the community. Participants also endorsed support for non-evidenced approaches such as: mandatory minimum sentences, the use of
GPS tracking devices, drug treatment for lowering sex drives, dangerous offender and long term offender legislation for all high risk sex offenders, sex offender registration, including public registration. Furthermore, the majority of participants felt that all sex offenders should serve prison time for their crimes and all high risk sex offenders should receive mandatory community supervision at the end of their sentence. Results have implications for future policies and reintegration strategies and may encourage collaboration between researchers, policy makers, and the public. Despite recent trends in Canadian policy supporting increasingly punitive “tough on crime” approach to offender management, this research suggests that the public not only supports punitive non-evidence based policy, but also policy in line with research evidence and which have been shown to decrease recidivism.

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Goals of the Poster Presentation:
1. Identify and discuss attitudes of Canadians towards sex offenders and sex offender treatment.
2. Identify and discuss what sex offender policies Canadians support. Do they support more evidence based policies or non-evidence based, or a combination?
3. Identify that attitudes towards sex offenders are predictive of the numbers of both evidence based and non-evidenced based policies Canadians endorse. Discuss implications of these findings.