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## Vulnerable Victims, Monstrous Offenders, and Unmanageable Risk: Explaining Public Opinion on the Social Control of Sex Crime

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**Vulnerable Victims, Monstrous Offenders, and Unmanageable Risk:  
Explaining Public Opinion on the Social Control of Sex Crime**

**ABSTRACT**

With the possible exception of terrorists, sex offenders in the United States experience a greater degree of punishment and restriction than any other offender group, non-violent or violent. Members of the public overwhelmingly support "get tough" sex crime policies, and display an intense hostility toward persons labeled "sex criminals." The theoretical literature identifies three models potentially explaining public opinion on the social control of sex crime: the victim-oriented concerns model, the sex offender stereotypes model, and the risk-management concerns model. There is an absence of empirical work, however, that directly tests these models. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing national survey data that includes measures of the key concepts outlined in the different theoretical models and items gauging support for punitive sex crime laws as well as support for sex offender treatment. The findings provide partial support for all three models, but suggest that extant theories are better able to explain support for punitive sex crime policies than views about sex offender treatment.

In the contemporary United States, individuals convicted of committing sexual offenses experience a higher level and intensity of public condemnation, and a greater degree of stigmatization and forfeiture of their civil liberties, than any other type of criminal offender, non-violent or violent (Lancaster, 2011; Zilney and Zilney, 2009). With state legislators often passing in excess of fifty new sex offender laws annually (Zilney and Zilney, 2009), the extent of legislative action directed at sexual offenders is unparalleled in the context of crime and punishment (Lynch, 2002; Simon and Leon, 2007). As a result, and unlike persons found guilty of even the most serious non-sexual offenses such as murder and armed robbery, sex offenders in many states can be held in custody involuntarily beyond their original sentences; are commonly required to register with authorities after being released from prison, as well as to contend with their pictures, names and addresses being made available to the public; are generally restricted in where they can live; and can be forced to undergo chemical castration (Levenson and D'Amora, 2007; Mancini, Barnes, and Mears, 2013).

What is perhaps most remarkable about such policies is the broad support for these and other similarly harsh sex offender laws among both policymakers (Lynch, 2002; Sample and Kadleck, 2008) and members of the public (Levenson et al., 2007; Mears et al., 2008). Indeed, scholars observe that in the public's view, "sex offenders are the scourge of modern America" (Logan, 1999: 1167); "the most despised members of our society" (Geraghty, 2007: 514); "our modern-day monsters, producing tidal waves of public demand" (Simon, 1998: 456); and a group for whom "the vehemence of the hatred...is unmatched by attitudes to any other offenders" (Sampson, 1994: 124). It is little wonder, then, that previous studies generally find that popular attitudes are the most punitive toward sex offenders (Deitz and Sissman, 1984; Manza, Brooks, and Uggen, 2004; Rogers and Ferguson, 2011; Willis, Levenson, and Ward,

2010). Nor is it surprising that most members of the public report that they would support severely retributive and stigmatizing sex offender laws even if there was no evidence demonstrating those policies are effective in controlling sexual offending (Levenson et al., 2007; Levenson, Shields, and Singleton, 2012).

Such public views about the social control of sex crime have the potential to function as a stimulus for ever more repressive sex crime policies, a barrier to the repeal of ineffective sex offender laws, and an obstacle to the successful reintegration of persons convicted of sexual offenses (Levenson and D'Amora, 2007; Mears et al., 2008; Willis, Levenson, and Ward, 2010).<sup>1</sup> For this reason, efforts to identify the motivations underlying popular hostility toward sex offenders are of particular importance.

Insights into the sources of this public outrage can be gained by examining the theoretical literature on the motivations underlying current sex offender laws. Our review of this work reveals three distinct theoretical models that may account for the public's retributive policy preferences in regard to the social control of sex crime. The first, the victim-oriented concerns model, focuses on popular concerns about sex crime victims tending to be female, young, and permanently damaged or contaminated by their victimization experiences (Jenkins, 1998; Lynch, 2002). The second, the sex offender stereotypes model, identifies a set of common stereotypes characterizing sex offenders as monstrous "others"—evil strangers who prey on the vulnerable without remorse and who are ultimately unreformable—as sources of public punitiveness (Quinn, Forsyth, and Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Spencer, 2009). The third, the risk-management concerns model, emphasizes the role of concerns about increasing rates of sexual victimization and the difficulties of defending against sexual predators (Lancaster, 2011; Simon, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

In our view, these models provide complementary rather than competing explanations,

and are direct extensions of broader theories of punitive justice. Specifically, that theoretical work identifies two important motivations for popular punitiveness—the desire for just deserts, emerging from moral outrage over both the harm inflicted on victims and the violation of revered societal norms, and the goals of deterrence and incapacitation, stemming from utilitarian concerns about personal safety (Carlsmith, 2006; Darley and Pittman, 2003; Tyler and Boeckmann, 1997). The victim-oriented concerns model builds on the just deserts account, suggesting that moral outrage over the sexual victimization of vulnerable victims is a key source of hostility toward sex offenders. The risk-management concerns model emphasizes the potential utilitarian motive for supporting harsh sex offender laws, namely that such laws represent one strategy for deterring future offending and managing the perceived threat posed by sex offenders. And the sex offender stereotypes model connects both motives, and suggests that certain conceptions of sex offenders (e.g., as incorrigible and immoral) may simultaneously increase moral outrage and the perceived need for regulating and incapacitating such offenders.

Despite this rich theoretical work, empirical assessments of the sources of public views about sex crime policies are scarce, and those that exist are primarily descriptive in nature (for a review of this literature, see Willis, Levenson, and Ward, 2010). Of particular relevance here is the absence of research directly testing the above theoretical models of public opinion about the social control of sex crime. This gap in the literature is significant because it precludes an understanding of the factors shaping the debate about how best to deal with sexual offenders and it raises the possibility that important social influences on the nature and content of sex crime policies may not yet be identified.

The current study addresses this research void. To do so, it analyzes national public opinion data that include measures of concern for sex crime victims, endorsement of sex

offender stereotypes, and risk-management concerns centering on the threat of sexual victimization, as well as items gauging support for both punitive sex crime policies and efforts to rehabilitate sex offenders. Below, we discuss theoretical and empirical work on social responses to sexual offending and public attitudes toward sex crime policies, the hypotheses that flow from this work, the data and methods used in this study, and the resultant findings. We conclude by discussing the study's implications for theory, research, and policy.

### **THE VICTIM-ORIENTED CONCERNS MODEL**

Theoretical treatises explaining the retributive and security-oriented nature of current crime control policies give considerable weight to the role of public concern about crime victims in motivating the desire both to punish offenders harshly and to expand law enforcement powers generally (Dubber, 2002; Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007). This literature argues that public concern for crime victims—intensified in recent decades by the activities of the mass media, politicians, and victims' rights groups—constitutes a significant source of solidarity in modern society. Solidarity with victims, in turn, fosters support for retributive crime policies by generating intense public anger over crime, increasing the perceived need to protect vulnerable persons from victimization, and undermining empathy for offenders (Pickett and Chiricos, 2012; Unnever and Cullen, 2009). The persons who are publicly perceived to be in the greatest need of protection from victimization, and whose victimization generates the most visceral and retributive public reaction, are females and young children (Dubber, 2002; Garland, 2001).

Scholarship on contemporary sex offender policies echoes these arguments. It also stresses that sexual victimization is generally associated in the public mind with women and

young children, and that it is widely believed that sex crime victims are subjected to a unique form of suffering greater in magnitude and more lasting than that experienced by victims of other offenses (Jenkins, 1998; Lynch, 2002). Lynch (2002: 536), for instance, explains that recent decades have witnessed “an ongoing sense of crisis about the particularly venal threat ... posed [by sexual offenders] to innocent women and children,” which has in turn motivated criminal justice responses in the form of punitive sex crime policies. The social construction of sexual victimization as an experience that is distinctively damaging or contaminating infused this ongoing sense of crisis with an emotional energy that intensified the demand for vengeance and protection. Examples of such social constructions include arguments that sex victims are “emotionally and spiritually murdered” (see Jenkins 1998: 123), that sex offenders “steal the innocence from our children and create scars for life” (see Lynch, 2002: 554), and that the sexual victimization of children “shatters their trust” (see Lynch, 2002: 554) and “is more heinous and more hideous than a homicide” because “it takes away their childhood, it mutilates their spirit. It kills their soul” (see Zilney and Zilney, 2009: 96).

In short, this scholarship points to a theoretical model in which the public’s perception that sex offenders tend to prey on the vulnerable and to inflict severe harm on their victims provides much of the impetus to take whatever means necessary, regardless of how harsh, to prevent sex crimes and punish sexual offending. As Quinn and colleagues (2004: 217) assert, “the extremity of sexual predation’s consequences, and the vulnerable status of its most publicized (i.e., child) victims are critical to the popular (and hence political) power and meaning of sex offender laws.”

Despite the popularity of this model as an account of popular views about sex crime policies, these theoretical predictions have not been examined empirically. One recent study has

assessed the effect of general concern for crime victims on public support for sex offender laws (Pickett et al., 2013). It showed that stronger supporters of victims' rights were more likely to favor a range of "get tough" policies, including: (1) holding sex offenders beyond their sentences, (2) videotaping high crime neighborhoods, and (3) imposing strict regulations on welfare recipients. The study, however, provided no direct evidence about whether, as theory suggests, perceptions about the characteristics of sex crime victims and the harm they suffer are determinants of support for punitive sex crime policies. For this reason, we test the following three hypotheses, which predict that support for punitive sex crime policies will be higher, and support for sex offender rehabilitation will be lower among persons who perceive that: (H1) a larger percentage of sex crime victims are female, (H2) a larger percentage of sex crime victims are young children, and (H3) sex crime victims suffer to a greater degree than victims of other serious crimes.

### **THE SEX OFFENDER STEREOTYPES MODEL**

A recurring proposition in scholarly accounts of punitive sex crime policies is that stereotypical conceptions of sex offenders as monstrous predators fuel popular hostility toward persons who commit sexual offenses (Douard, 2008; Quinn, Forsyth, and Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Spencer, 2009). Spencer (2009: 226), for example, contends that in popular discourse, the sex offender is typically constructed as a "monstrous animal"—a predator who is an "incurably lost, totally depraved, evil being unable to redeem himself and, as such, deserves to be banned [from the community]" (see also, Douard, 2008: 32). Garland (2001: 136-137) likewise explains that the dominant image of the child sexual offender depicts him as being "dangerous, driven,



unreachable—an unreformable creature who...lurks unseen in our daily environment, his 'otherness' concealed.'" Thus after being identified, "he has to be marked out, and either set apart or else continuously monitored." And Sampson (1994: 124) argues directly that "the image of sex offender as beast or monster sanctions punitive or brutal attitudes toward sex offenders."

Scholars commonly cite three specific sex offender stereotypes as integral to the conception of sex offenders as monstrous predators. These include the beliefs that sex offenders (1) tend to be strangers to their victims; (2) commit their offenses because of personal immorality, deviant sexual desires, and selfishness; and (3) are, in all but the rarest cases, unreformable (Jenkins, 1998; Quinn, Forsyth, and Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Sample and Bray, 2003; Spencer, 2009; see also Levenson et al., 2007). In short, sex offenders are commonly viewed as monsters because they are seen as predatory outsiders who are "stricken with a perverted disease for which there is no cure" (Spencer, 2009: 225). The assumption is that this public understanding of sex offenders functions to justify both the use of harsh punishments rather than rehabilitation to respond to sexual offending, and the implementation of repressive measures to monitor and segregate sex offenders once they are released (Douard, 2008).

Notwithstanding the large literature advancing these theoretical claims, there is little empirical research that examines this stereotype model. To our knowledge, only two studies explore whether sex offender stereotypes are associated with public views about sex crime policies, and both focus exclusively on the effects of beliefs about sex offenders' amenability to reform. Mancini and Mears (2010) show that persons who judge that, regardless of the sanction imposed, sex offenders are highly likely to recidivate are more likely to support executing offenders who rape an adult or sexually abuse a child. Levenson and colleagues (2012) find that persons who believe most sex offenders will reoffend are less likely to perceive that residence

restrictions for sex offenders moving to new addresses are an additional punishment, but are no less likely to perceive forced relocation as an additional punishment.

Put simply, the evidence to date is mixed as to whether the stereotype of sex offenders as unreformable recidivists is associated with punitiveness. Such inconsistent findings may reflect the focus in prior research on single-item measures of specific sex offender policies (i.e., capital punishment and residence restrictions) rather than on general support for either punitive sex crime policies or sex offender rehabilitation. Additionally, the results from previous studies do not inform the question of whether stereotypical beliefs about sex offenders' relationships to their victims or motivations for offending shape views about sex crime policies. Accordingly, we test a second set of hypotheses that predict that support for punitive sex crime policies will be higher, and that support for sex offender rehabilitation will be lower, among persons who perceive that: (H4) a larger percentage of sex offenders are strangers to their victims, (H5) sex offenders cannot be rehabilitated, and (H6) sex crime is caused by personal immorality.

### **THE RISK-MANAGEMENT CONCERNS MODEL**

A third theoretical model suggests that the motivation for punitive sex crime policies results, in part, from public concerns about increasing rates of sexual offending and anxieties about the difficulty of defending against sexual victimization in today's society, where contact with strangers is routine and unavoidable (Lancaster, 2011; McAlinden, 2006; Petrunik, 2002; Simon, 1998, see also Garland, 2001). Perhaps because of sensationalized media coverage of sex crime (Fox, 2013; Lancaster, 2011), and despite objective declines in sexual victimization in recent decades (Finkelhor and Jones, 2012; Zilney and Zilney, 2009), the vast majority of the

public believes that sex offenses are on the rise (Levenson et al., 2007; Mancini and Mears, 2010). As Sampson (1994: 42) observes, the mass media's extensive coverage of sexual offending gives members of the public "the impression that there has been an unprecedented explosion in sexual crime, and that women and children are increasingly at risk of attack by sexual monsters." According to scholars, this belief generates popular support for directing repressive social controls at sex offenders in the name of increased security and retribution (Lancaster, 2011; McAlinden, 2006; Petrunik, 2002; Quinn, Forsyth, and Mullen-Quinn, 2004).

Amplifying the perceived threat of sex crime is the popular understanding that sexual danger breaches traditional boundaries of safety (Lancaster, 2011; Lynch, 2002). Most criminal risks are associated in the public mind with city streets and are thus managed, at least to an extent, with routine precautions such as avoiding certain public areas and relocating to the suburbs or gated communities (see, e.g., Garland, 2001: 161-163). However, popular accounts of sex crime depict sexual threat as pervasive across all types of communities and neighborhoods, in daycares and schools, and even within private homes via the internet (Jenkins, 1998; Lynch, 2002). Thus, as Lancaster (2011: 94) explains, the sex offender terrorizes even those persons who are normally the most protected from crime and, in so doing, "anchors the culture of control firmly within the far-flung redoubts of the white heterosexual middle-class family." Correspondingly, a common theme in public debates about sex offender legislation is the need to provide additional information and tools to community members to aid them in detecting sexual risks and defending against sexual victimization (Jenkins, 1998; Lancaster, 2011; Simon, 1998). Indeed, even with current registry and notification laws, public officials cite the need for more policies designed to help citizens better and more quickly identify sex offenders (Sample and Kadleck, 2008).

In short, scholarship suggests that the perception that sex crimes are increasing and anxiety about the difficulty of protecting oneself and family against sexual victimization should increase support for harsh sex offender laws. Yet, little research exists that assesses the relationship between concerns about the threat of sexual victimization and public views about sex offender laws. Two studies analyze data from residents of Michigan and find that fear of sexual assault is positively associated with support for punitive sex crime policies (Comartin, Kernsmith, and Kernsmith, 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, and Foster, 2009). A third study, which analyzes data from a national survey conducted in 1991, shows that neither the fear of sexual assault nor the perception that sex crime is on the rise influence views about giving the death penalty to sex offenders (Mancini and Mears, 2010). The null effects observed in Mancini and Mears's (2010) study may reflect their sole focus on predicting support for capital punishment for sex crimes. Importantly, none of these investigations explored whether, as theory predicts, judgments about the difficulty of defending against sexual victimization shape views about sex crime policies. To extend prior scholarship, then, we test two additional hypotheses that predict support for punitive sex crime policies will be higher, and support for sex offender rehabilitation will be lower, among persons who perceive that: (H7) sex crime is on the rise, and (H8) there is little they can do to defend against sexual victimization.

## **METHODS**

To test our hypotheses, we draw on data from a web-based survey conducted in the summer of 2012 with a sample of American adults (18 and older) participating in a large nonprobability online panel. Such data should not be used to generate estimates of the

prevalence of attitudes and behaviors in the general population, because respondents who have access to the internet and who agree to participate in online panels differ in some respects from other members of the public; for example, they tend to be better educated and more politically involved (Baker et al., 2010).<sup>3</sup> However, nonprobability samples can be useful for evaluating theories and, indeed, are frequently used for this purpose in the criminological literature (see, e.g., Broidy, 2001; Hay, 2001; Nagin and Paternoster, 1994; Stets and Carter, 2012; Van Gelder and de Vries, 2012). This is because data from nonprobability samples can provide important insights into a theory's empirical plausibility, after which subsequent studies can begin to identify whether its explanatory power varies across social groups (see Broidy, 2001: 15). For the same reason, nonprobability online panels can be a valuable resource for testing theories of public opinion.

Online samples have additional benefits. In web surveys respondents can respond at their leisure and their own pace, interviewer-induced measurement error is reduced, and complex questions are presented visually (Baker et al., 2010; Sue and Ritter, 2012). Experimental research suggests that relative to telephone and in-person interviews, web surveys with volunteer panelists elicit less social desirability bias and more valid self-reports of attitudes and behaviors (Chang and Krosnick, 2010; Kreuter et al., 2008). Compared with correlational results from probability samples interviewed either by telephone or in person, findings from nonprobability internet samples yield remarkably similar relational inferences (Berrens et al., 2003; Sanders et al., 2007; Stephenson and Crête, 2010). For these reasons, researchers increasingly are turning to nonprobability online panels to gain insights into important social phenomena (see, e.g., Brooks and Valentino, 2011; Griswold and Wright, 2004; Van Gelder and de Vries, 2012).

In the current study, respondents were sampled from SurveyMonkey's large online

Audience panel. SurveyMonkey's Audience panel is particularly useful for our purposes because of its size, dual incentive structure that appeals to both altruism and self-interest, and precautions to ensure the quality of responses. This opt-in panel includes more than 400,000 active panelists recruited through a variety of web contacts who receive two incentives (i.e., an automatic donation in their name to charity, and a chance to win \$100 in weekly drawings) for participating in surveys.<sup>4</sup> To ensure the quality of responses, SurveyMonkey limits panelists to two surveys per week and removes individuals from the panel who are identified as engaging in inappropriate responding behavior. SurveyMonkey also employs an algorithm that utilizes IP addresses to minimize the risk of duplicate respondents in a survey.

For each research project, SurveyMonkey provides a random sample of panelists who meet the targeting criteria specified by the researcher. In the current project, the targeting criteria required that respondents be at least 18 years old and reside in the U.S. In addition, an effort was made to oversample black panelists, because blacks tend to be underrepresented in web surveys (Baker et al., 2010). SurveyMonkey sent generic emails announcing an available survey and providing a link to the questionnaire to 2898 randomly sampled panelists who met these criteria. In total, 612 of the sampled respondents clicked on the provided link and started the questionnaire.<sup>5</sup> Of these individuals, 537 (88%) completed the survey.

As is common in the case of internet surveys (Baker et al., 2010), the final sample differed demographically from the general population of American adults, particularly in regard to ethnicity and education. Specifically, the sample had the following characteristics (as compared to the adult U.S. population in parentheses): Female, 51% (51%); White, 75% (75%); Black, 16% (12%); Latino, 5% (14%); age 65 or older, 15% (17%); four-year college degree, 57% (25%); and annual household income of \$100,000 or more, 27% (21%). However, the

distributions of sample members' attitudes toward sex crime policies and experiences with sexual offending are generally similar to the U.S. population. For example, 87% of respondents support publicizing the names and addresses of sex offenders, and 79% support imposing residence restrictions on sex offenders. A recent national poll with similarly worded questions shows that 92% of Americans support sex offender notification, and 76% support residence restrictions (Mears et al., 2008). Among sample members, 26% report having a family member who has been victimized sexually. National poll data show that 33% of Americans know either a relative or close friend who has been victimized sexually (Mancini and Mears, 2010).

## DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Research demonstrates that punitiveness and support for rehabilitation are related but distinct phenomena (Mancini and Houtman, 2006; McCorkle, 1993) and that people often simultaneously support both punitive policies and treatment efforts (Cullen, Fisher, and Applegate, 2000). For this reason, we examine both *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws* and *Support for Sex Offender Treatment* to allow a comprehensive assessment of public attitudes toward different approaches to controlling sexual offending.

The *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws* variable is comprised of responses to seven items that asked respondents how much they oppose or support (1 = strongly oppose, 7 = strongly support) the following policies: 1) Making the names and addresses of sex offenders available to the public; 2) limiting where sex offenders can live; 3) keeping sex offenders who are still considered dangerous locked up past their original sentence; 4) banning sex offenders from online social networking sites like Facebook; 5) banning sex offenders from using the

internet at all; 6) making sentences more severe for persons who commit sex crimes; 7) giving the death penalty to repeat sex offenders. All of these policies have either been debated or enacted by policymakers in recent years (Mancini, Barnes, and Mears, 2013; Zilney and Zilney, 2009). Views about the seven policies load onto a single factor (eigenvalue = 3.91); loadings range from .65 to .81). We averaged across responses to create an index with a Cronbach's alpha of .86. Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for this measure and those described below.

*Support for Sex Offender Treatment* is developed from responses to four items that asked respondents how much they oppose or support (1 = strongly oppose, 7 = strongly support) each of the following: 1) Expanding counseling programs for sex offenders in prison; 2) expanding group therapy programs for sex offenders in prison; 3) increasing taxes to pay for sex offender rehabilitation programs; 4) requiring employers with job openings to give an equal chance to sex offenders who have served their sentence. We include the fourth item, which taps views about eliminating employment discrimination, because scholars suggest that successful reintegration is a key component of sex offender rehabilitation (Levenson, D'Amora, and Hern, 2007; Willis, Levenson, and Ward, 2010). A factor analysis confirmed that these four items are highly correlated with a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.28); loadings ranged from .51 to .91). We averaged responses to create an index with a Cronbach's alpha of .70. The correlation between this measure and the *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws* variable is -.232 ( $p < .001$ ), which suggests that the two measures of policy preferences are tapping distinct but related phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

These two dependent variables, along with the independent variables described below, are derived from items that ask about sex offenders broadly, rather than about subtypes of sex offenders. Adopting this measurement approach is important for two reasons. First, sex crime policies are generally debated and enacted without distinguishing between specific categories of



sexual offenders (Jenkins, 1998; Zilney and Zilney, 2009). Second, as Lancaster (2011: 89) emphasizes, “part of what defines the current wave of sex panics is the desire to discover, publicize, and perpetually punish even minor infractions.” Indeed, Jenkins (1998: 9) argues that in the dominant perspective “there is no such thing as a *minor* sexual offense” and prior research demonstrates that “people subscribe to the myth that all sex offenders pose an equal and serious threat to communities” (Levenson et al., 2007:17).

## INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The analyses include eight independent variables. The first three capture respondents’ concerns about sex crime victims and thus are helpful in examining the victims-concerns model. *Perceived Percent Female* and *Perceived Percent Children* are equal to the percentages reported for females and young children in the following two questions: “When you think about the victims of sex crimes, approximately what percent would you say are female and what percent are male?” “When you think about the victims of sex crimes, approximately what percent would you say are young children, what percent are teenagers, and what percent are adults?” *Relative Harm to Victims* is a seven-item index that gauges respondents’ perceptions of the harm inflicted on sex crime victims compared to victims of other serious crimes. It is derived from responses to the following question:

Compared to other serious crimes like burglary and robbery, the typical sex crime causes victims how much more or less of the following ... 1) emotional trauma; 2) psychological trauma; 3) depression; 4) damage to their ability to trust others; 5) damage to their social lives; 6) physical injury; 7) overall suffering?

The original response options for this question ranged from 1 = much more to 7 = much less. We recoded these items so that higher values indicate greater perceived harm to sex crime victims. Because few respondents reported that sex crime victims suffer less than other victims, we combined the four lower responses options into a single category to yield seven items with the following response values: 1 = about the same or less, 2 = somewhat more, 3 = more, and 4 = much more. We averaged responses to create an index with a Cronbach's alpha of .88. A factor analysis confirmed that these seven items are highly correlated with a single factor (eigenvalue = 4.28) with loadings that range from .56 to .84.

The next three independent variables measure respondents' endorsement of sex offender stereotypes and thus are useful in examining the sex offender stereotypes model. *Perceived Percent Strangers* is measured with the following question: "When you think about the victims of sex crimes, approximately what percent would you say are related to the offender, what percent know the offender but are not related, and what percent don't know the offender?" The variable is equal to the percentage reported for the third category in this question (i.e., "don't know the offender"). *Unreformable* is measured with responses to the following question: "In general, do you think sex offenders can be successfully rehabilitated?" where 0 = yes, and 1 = no. *Immoral Character* is an index (Cronbach's alpha = .62) equal to the average of responses (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to the following three statements regarding the causes of sex crime: 1) "Most sex offenders commit sex crimes because they have bad moral character"; 2) "most sex offenders commit sex crimes because they have been exposed to pornography in the past"; 3) "most sex offenders commit sex crimes because they are just selfish people."<sup>7</sup> The three items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue = 1.72) with loadings that range from .68 to .80.<sup>8</sup>

The final set of independent variables measures respondents' concerns about the threat of

sexual victimization and are useful in examining the risk-management concerns model.

*Perceived Sex Crime Trend* is measured with the following question: “In your best judgment, how has the number of sex crimes committed annually in the U.S. changed over the past five years?” The original response options ranged from 1 = decreased greatly to 5 = increased greatly. Only five respondents believed that sex crimes had decreased greatly over the past five years, so we combined the two lowest categories to yield the following response values: 1 = decreased, 2 = stayed the same, 3 = increased some, 4 = increased greatly. *Perceived Lack of Control* is equal to respondents’ responses to the following question: “How much control do you feel you have over whether or not someone in your family becomes the victim of a sex crime in the next five years?” The response categories for this measure are 1 = a great deal, 2 = a good amount, 3 = some, 4 = very little, and 5 = none at all.

## CONTROL VARIABLES

The analyses incorporate several controls for factors that theory and research suggest may shape attitudes toward the sanctioning of sex offenders (see, e.g., Jenkins, 1998; Mears et al., 2008; Pickett et al., 2013; Zilney and Zilney, 2009). These include gender (*Female* = 1), whether the respondent is a parent with children under the age of 18 (*Parent* = 1), marital status (*Married* = 1), race (*White* = 1), *Age*, *Education*, *Income*, *Conservatism*, whether the respondent is *Religious*, and whether anyone in the respondents’ immediate family has ever been the victim of a sex crime (*Sex Crime Victim* = 1). *Age* is measured as follows: 1 = 18 to 24 years, 2 = 25 to 34 years, 3 = 35 to 44 years, 4 = 45 to 54 years, 5 = 55 to 64 years, and 6 = 65 or over. The response categories for the *Education* variable are: 1 = high school diploma or less, 2 = some

college, 3 = Bachelor's degree, 4 = Master's degree, law degree or similar graduate degree, and 5 = PhD, MD, or other advanced graduate degree. *Income* is the total household income in 2011, where 1 = up to \$14,999, 2 = \$15,000 to \$34,999, 3 = \$35,000 to \$49,999, 4 = \$50,000 to \$74,999, 5 = \$75,000 to \$99,999, and 6 = \$100,000 or more.<sup>9</sup> *Conservatism* is measured with the question: "How would you describe yourself politically?" where 1 = very liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = middle of the road, 4 = conservative, and 5 = very conservative. *Religious* is measured with the question: "How important would you say religion is in your life?" where 1 = very unimportant, 2 = unimportant, 3 = somewhat unimportant, 4 = somewhat important, 5 = important, and 6 = very important.

Because research indicates that residential context may influence attitudes toward sex crime policies (see, e.g., Button et al., 2013), we also control for the characteristics of respondents' local environments. First, drawing on 2010 U.S. Census data, we measure the percentage of residents in a respondent's county who are under the age of eighteen (*Percent Under 18*). As an indicator of the presence of vulnerable populations, this measure might influence both views about the characteristics of sex crime victims and attitudes toward sex crime policies. Second, using data from the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website, we also control for the number of registered sex offenders in the respondents' ZIP codes (*Number of RSOs*). Because this variable is skewed, we use its square root in the regression models. We also incorporate controls for the local political climate—*Percent Republican*—and the respondent's region of residence (*South* = 1). *Percent Republican* is equal to the percentage of the county that voted for John McCain in the 2008 presidential election.

Table 1 about here

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Because both outcome variables in this study are continuous, we employ ordinary least squares regression to estimate the models. Cases with missing values on variables other than the income measure were dropped from the analyses using listwise deletion. Too few respondents are nested within counties to allow for multilevel modeling—the 537 respondents are clustered in 305 counties for an average of 1.76 respondents per county. For this reason, we use Stata’s `vce(cluster)` command, which generates robust standard errors that are unbiased in the context of clustered data, to correct for potential problems resulting from correlated error terms. Multicollinearity is not problematic in this study—the largest variance inflation factor in any of the models is 1.52. We present unstandardized regression coefficients in the tables, along with two-tailed significance tests.

## FINDINGS

We begin by estimating baseline models that assess the degree to which respondents’ demographic characteristics and residential environments can account for their views about punitive and rehabilitative approaches to the social control of sex crime. Table 2 presents the findings for *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws*. Table 3 presents the findings for *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*.

Tables 2 and 3 about here

The findings for model 1 in table 2 reveal that punitiveness toward sex offenders tends to be higher among females, parents with young children, persons with less education, political conservatives, and those living in areas where a larger percentage of residents are minors. For model 1 in table 3, which focuses on support for sex offender treatment, a different pattern emerges. Whites, those with less education, political conservatives, and southerners are all less likely to support efforts to rehabilitate sex offenders. Political conservatism is by far the strongest predictor of both punitiveness (table 2) and support for treatment (table 3) (Beta = .270 and Beta -.211, respectively). Collectively, the demographic and contextual controls account for a modest amount of the variation in respondents' attitudes toward punitive and rehabilitative efforts to control sex crime (adjusted  $R^2 = .156$  and  $.078$ , respectively).

The second models in tables 2 and 3 test the theoretical argument that victim-oriented concerns—particularly, the perceived gender and age of sex victims and the belief that sexual victimization causes a relatively great degree of suffering—explain policy preferences about the social control of sex crime. In model 2 in table 2, two of the three measures of victim-oriented concerns are, as hypothesized, positively related to *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws*. Specifically, punitive attitudes toward sex offenders tend to be higher among those who believe a larger percentage of sex crime victims are young children and among those who believe that sex crime victims experience more trauma and harm than victims of other serious crimes. Including these measures increases the explanatory power of the model predicting punitiveness (model 1 in table 2) by more than 62% (adjusted  $R^2 = .253$  vs.  $.156$ ,  $F$ -test = 20.820,  $p < .001$ ). By contrast, none of the three victim-oriented concerns variables are significantly associated with *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*, and their inclusion does not add to the explanatory power of the model.

In the third models in tables 2 and 3, we examine the extent to which the sex offender stereotypes model can explain attitudes about the punishment and treatment of sex offenders. Recall that this model anticipates that endorsement of certain generalizations about the sex offender population—such as the view that sex offenders tend to be strangers to their victims, unreformable, and immoral—will be associated with greater punitiveness and less support for rehabilitation. The analyses show that, as expected, endorsing the view that sex offenders are unreformable and believing that sex offenders tend to have an immoral character both significantly increase support for punitive sex crime laws (table 2) and reduce support for rehabilitative responses to sexual offending (table 3). The *Perceived Percent Strangers* measure does not significantly predict either outcome.

As with the victim-concerns model (model 2 in tables 2 and 3), inclusion of the stereotype predictors increases the explanatory power of the model predicting punitiveness by a significant amount (135%), relative to the baseline model (adjusted  $R^2 = .366$  vs.  $.156$ ,  $F$ -test =  $53.107$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The stereotype measures also contribute substantially to the support-for-treatment model (model 3 in table 3) (adjusted  $R^2 = .222$  vs.  $.078$ ,  $F$ -test =  $29.676$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We turn now to the test of the risk-management concerns theoretical model: model 4 in tables 2 and 3, respectively. These models examine whether respondents' perceptions about two dimensions of sexual risk—the view that sex crimes have increased and the view that it is difficult to defend against sexual victimization—affect their *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws* and *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*. Model 4 in table 2 shows that risk-management concerns significantly drive support for “get tough” sex crime legislation—both the perception that sex crime is increasing and the view that one is defenseless against sexual victimization are associated with an increased likelihood of supporting punitive sex crime laws (the latter is,

however, only statistically significant at  $p = .091$ ). When we examine *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*, a different pattern emerges. Here, only the perception that sex crimes is on the rise is associated with reduced support for rehabilitation (model 4, table 4). Relative to the two baseline models, including the risk-management concerns significantly increases the amount of explained variation in both punitiveness (adjusted  $R^2 = .227$  vs.  $.156$ ,  $F$ -test = 22.136,  $p < .001$ ) and support for treatment (adjusted  $R^2 = .093$  vs.  $.078$ ,  $F$ -test = 3.986,  $p < .05$ ).

A central question is whether the three theoretical models constitute complementary perspectives that collectively provide greater explanatory power when predicting public attitudes about punishing and treating sex offenders. The fifth models in tables 2 and 3 examine this question by simultaneously including the measures of victim-related concerns, sex offender stereotypes, and risk-management concerns. When the focus is on public views about punitive approaches to controlling sex offenders (model 5 in table 2), we see support for all three models. Two victim-related concerns (*Perceived Percent Children*, and *Relative Harm to Victims*), three sex offender stereotypes (*Perceived Percent Strangers*, significant only at  $p < .10$ , *Unreformable*, and *Immoral Character*), and one measure of risk-management concerns (*Perceived Sex Crime Trend*) all significantly predict greater *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws*. The three strongest predictors of punitiveness toward sex offenders are the beliefs that they are unreformable (Beta = .313) and immoral (Beta = .215), and the perception that sex victims suffer to a greater degree than other types of victims (Beta = .197).

There is less support for the three models when the focus is on public views about rehabilitative efforts to control sex crime (model 5 in table 3). Only three of the concerns and beliefs theorized to shape public attitudes toward sex offender policies have statistically significant effects, and only two of these effects are in the predicted direction. Contrary to our



hypotheses, the *Relative Harm to Victims* measure is positively associated with *Support for Sex Offender Treatment Programs* ( $p = .026$ ). On the other hand, and as hypothesized, the *Unreformable* and *Immoral Character* variables predict lower levels of *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*. These two measures of sex offender stereotypes are the strongest predictors in the model (Beta =  $-.349$  and  $-.160$ , respectively).

Overall, the full models for both outcome variables improve the baseline models in explaining policy preferences about the social control of sex crime. In comparison to the baseline model for *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws* (model 1 in table 2), inclusion of the three sets of measures increases the explanatory power of the model by approximately 177% (adjusted  $R^2 = .432$  vs.  $.156$ ,  $F$ -test =  $28.912$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, the full model for *Support for Sex Offender Treatment* is able to account for 188% more of the variation in views about sex offender treatment, relative to the baseline model (adjusted  $R^2 = .225$  vs.  $.078$ ,  $F$ -test =  $11.286$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Collectively the three theoretical models appear to help account for attitudes toward both punitive and rehabilitative strategies to control sex crime.<sup>10</sup>

A final observation bears mention—specifically, inclusion of the measures from the three theoretical models substantially reduces the effect of conservatism on policy preferences. As compared to the baseline model for punitiveness (model 1 in table 2), the coefficient for *Conservatism* is 51% smaller. The comparable reduction in the coefficient for *Conservatism* when predicting support for treatment is 36%. This mediating effect is notable because political conservatism was the strongest predictor in the baseline models for both outcome variables. These findings suggest that the effect of political ideology on attitudes toward both punitive and rehabilitative efforts to control sex crime may be explained in part by perceptions about the age of and harm caused to sex victims, judgments about sex offenders' motivations and potential for

reform, and assessments of sex crime trends.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The past two decades have witnessed the adoption of numerous “get tough” sex offender laws that are uniquely repressive in comparison to other crime policies, and that indicate that society views even nonviolent sex offenders as posing “a far more immediate menace than the mugger, robber, murderer, confidence trickster, or corporate polluter” (Jenkins, 1998: 200). A large body of evidence has shown that many of these punitive sex offender laws are ineffective and may actually contribute to recidivism (Freeman, 2012; Socia, 2011; Tewksbury and Jennings, 2010; Vásquez et al., 2008; Zgoba et al., 2010). Even so, the public overwhelmingly supports these policies (Levenson et al., 2007; Mears et al., 2008), and its intense hostility toward persons convicted of sexual offenses may constitute a significant impediment to efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate sex offenders (Willis, Levenson, and Ward, 2010). For this reason, scholars have suggested that an understanding of the factors that shape popular views about sexual offending laws is important for attempts to implement effective, evidence-based approaches to controlling sex crime (Mears et al., 2008; Willis, Levenson, and Ward, 2010).

Drawing on the theoretical literature aimed at identifying the sources of public attitudes toward sex offenders (Jenkins, 1998; Lancaster, 2011; Spencer, 2009), we demarcated and tested predictions from three theoretical models of public opinion on the social control of sex crime: the victim-oriented concerns model, the sex offender stereotypes model, and the risk-management concerns model. All three models received partial support in our analysis. Specifically, punitiveness toward sex offenders tended to be higher among individuals who (1) perceived that

a larger proportion of sex crime victims are young children, (2) believed that such victims suffer more than victims of other crimes, (3) endorsed stereotypes of sex offenders as unreformable and driven to crime by immorality, and (4) judged that sex crimes have increased over the previous five years. The results revealed that sex offender stereotypes, particularly the stereotype of sex offenders as unreformable, may play the most prominent role in generating hostility toward persons convicted of sex crimes.

An additional finding was that the strong effect of political conservatism on views about sexual offending laws was partially mediated by perceptions of sex crime victims, offenders, and trends. Some scholars theorize that among certain people, particularly social conservatives, pornography and sexual offending are symbolic of putative negative changes in family structure, gender roles, and sexual norms (Jenkins, 1998; Lynch, 2002). Perhaps such persons believe that, as a consequence of the attenuation of traditional patriarchal values, sexual victimization is increasing and a growing number of young sex victims are being “contaminated” by sexual predators (see Lynch, 2002: 544-50). In turn, this viewpoint, regardless of its accuracy, may foster anger and disgust sufficient to motivate extreme efforts to protect potential victims and to avenge transgressions against the sanctity of families (Lynch, 2002).

Several theoretical and empirical implications flow from the findings. First, the results provide support for broader theoretical accounts of punitiveness. Extant theories suggest that moral outrage, and thus the desire for retribution, increases with the extent of victim harm and offender blameworthiness (Carlsmith, 2006; Darley and Pittman, 2003). The evidence here that the perceived age and suffering of sex crime victims and the perceived immorality of sex offenders all predict support for punitive sex crime laws is consistent with this model of punitiveness. The findings also support utilitarian accounts of punitiveness, which specify that

punitive policies often receive public support because of their presumed crime control benefits. Here the argument is that concerns about rising crime rates and high rates of recidivism increase support for harsh punishments because the latter are believed to deter future offending and incapacitate incorrigible offenders (see Carlsmith, 2006; Tyler and Boeckmann, 1997). Consistent with this argument, we find that the beliefs that sex crime is on the rise and that sex offenders are unreformable are both associated with greater support for punitive sex crime laws.

The second implication of the results, however, is that there is a need for theoretical accounts of public attitudes toward sex offenders that take into consideration the complex nature of such views. The three models collectively highlight, and the results in this study demonstrate, that no single impetus drives views about punishing sex offenders. Rather, concerns about victims, assumptions about the criminal propensity of such offenders, and anxieties about victimization all contribute to support for punitive laws. At the same time, few of these variables predict negative views about sex offender treatment. This finding dovetails with those from previous studies showing that many predictors of punitive attitudes, such as authoritarianism and racial stereotypes, do not similarly predict opposition to rehabilitation (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Mascini and Houtman, 2006; Nielsen, Bonn, and Wilson, 2010). Additional theoretical work is thus needed that illuminates the independent sources of views about rehabilitation and accounts for why certain predictors of punitiveness may not affect such views.

Another important line of inquiry for future studies is to investigate the sources of public information about both sex crime trends and sexual offenders. Our findings show that inaccurate beliefs about the nature and extent of sexual offending appear to be strongly associated with policy preferences. For example, we find that both the perception that sex crime is on the rise and the view that sex offenders are unreformable—beliefs endorsed by most members of the

public (Levenson et al., 2007)—increase support for punitive sex crime policies. Yet, available evidence demonstrates that sexual victimization rates are on the decline, and have been for more than a decade (Finkelhor and Jones, 2012; Zilney and Zilney, 2009). Similarly, as Zilney and Zilney (2009: 172) emphasize, “not one scientifically sound research study has concluded that sex offenders are incurable and have an insatiable desire to commit more offenses.” Instead, research shows that sex offender treatment can effectively reduce reoffending (Hall, 1995; Hanson et al., 2002), and that sex offenders actually have relatively low recidivism rates in comparison to other types of criminals (Zilney and Zilney, 2009).

Directly related to this issue is the need for future research that examines how public perceptions about the relative degree of harm inflicted on sex crime victims, as compared to victims of other crimes, compare/contrast with objective indicators of harm. Stated differently, it is not clear whether public judgments about the suffering associated with sexual victimization are exaggerated in the same way as popular views about sex crime trends and sex offender recidivism. Investigating this question is important because inflated beliefs about victim harm that lead to an inaccurate labeling of all sex crime victims as being permanently damaged or “contaminated” (see Lynch, 2002) may prolong the victimization experience and intensify the associated psychological and emotional trauma (Lancaster, 2011: 204-206).

Researchers seeking to extend our work should also consider examining the nuanced ways in which views about sex crime victims may affect public attitudes toward sexual offending laws. For instance, the belief that the trauma of sexual victimization can cause future offending by sex crime victims is common among members of the public (Levenson et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible that, in addition to generating moral outrage, the view that sex crime victims suffer to a relatively great degree may increase punitiveness by stimulating concerns about future

offending by sex crime victims. At the same time, the perception that sexual victimization can cause offending may also explain the surprising finding in this study that perceived victim harm is positively associated with support for rehabilitation. An examination of these possibilities may be best accomplished through the use of qualitative interviews that capture respondents' specific concerns about how sexual victimization affects sex crime victims. Such investigations have the potential to provide additional explanations for the high levels of punitiveness toward sex offenders observed in this and other studies (Levenson et al., 2007; Mears et al., 2008).

In closing, it is important to reiterate that a limitation of this study is that we analyze data from a nonprobability online panel. Although the use of nonprobability samples, including convenience samples of college students, for the purpose of theory testing is common in the criminological literature (see, e.g., Broidy, 2001; Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Stets and Carter, 2012), it leaves open the possibility that observed findings may not generalize to broader populations. Future studies are thus needed that explore the theoretical models tested herein using data from representative samples of U.S. residents. Researchers should also evaluate the potential bias in findings introduced by the use of nonprobability online panels in studies of crime and justice issues. Studies document, for example, the "excellent accuracy of online nonprobability sample polls" for forecasting electoral outcomes (Baker et al., 2010: 743).<sup>11</sup> If a similar level of accuracy is found for criminal justice topics, web surveys with volunteer panelists may prove particularly useful for criminological research due to their low costs and additional data collection benefits, such as reduced social desirability bias (see Chang and Krosnick, 2010; Kreuter et al., 2008).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Recent research indicates that public opinion can sometimes influence both crime policy and the decisions made by criminal justice actors (Brace and Boyea, 2008; Enns, 2010; Nicholson-Crotty, Peterson, and Ramirez, 2009). For example, Enns (2010) estimates that increased public punitiveness accounted for more than 160,000 federal incarcerations since the mid-1980s.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, more than sixty years ago, Edwin Sutherland (1950) anticipated these models as central for explaining social responses to sex crime. He observed that sexual offender laws rest on “a series of propositions which have been made explicit in an extensive popular literature,” including the idea that the “present danger to women and children from serious sex crimes is very great, for the number of sex crimes is large and is increasing more rapidly than any other crime; that most sex crimes are committed by ‘sexual degenerates,’ ‘sex fiends,’ or ‘sexual psychopaths’ and that these persons persist in their sexual crimes throughout life” (p. 142).

<sup>3</sup> The most recent statistics indicate that approximately 82% of adults in the U.S. use the internet on at least an occasional basis, while 88% own a cell phone (Zickuhr and Madden, 2012), and less than 66% have access to a landline within their household (Blumberg and Luke, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Members of SurveyMonkey’s Audience panel are recruited through the SurveyMonkey.com platform through three primary methods: (1) visiting the SurveyMonkey.com website, (2) responding to a solicitation that commonly follows the completion of a survey administered by a SurveyMonkey member, and (3) signing up to be a member of SurveyMonkey. Upwards of 30 million individuals complete surveys administered by SurveyMonkey members each month, thus the practice of soliciting respondents who complete such surveys to join the Audience panel constitutes the primary method of recruitment.

<sup>5</sup> The generic invitation emailed to respondents did not include specific information about the survey topic, and thus it is unlikely that the decision to proceed to the questionnaire was affected by interest in sex crime policies. In addition, recent evidence suggests that in web surveys, the topic of the survey has little influence on volunteer panelists' propensity to participate (Tourangeau et al., 2009).

<sup>6</sup> A separately conducted factor analysis that included all eleven items from both the *Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws* and the *Support for Sex Offender Treatment* variables confirmed this distinction (see the online supplement).

<sup>7</sup> The item in this index asking about pornography exposure is included because, in public discourse, such exposure has long been theorized to be strongly related, in a reciprocal manner, to deviant sexual desires, and thus to be a key cause of sexual offending (see Jenkins, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Although this alpha score is lower than the ideal, it likely reflects the small number of items in the index rather than the uniqueness of the items (see Carmines and Zeller, 1979). Note also that alpha generally "provides a conservative estimate of a measure's reliability" (p. 45).

<sup>9</sup> To avoid excluding respondents from the analyses solely because of nonresponse to the income question, we imputed missing values for this measure based on the other explanatory variables. The results were similar, however, when cases with missing data on this item were dropped.

<sup>10</sup> We conducted ancillary analyses in which we reestimated all of the models using post-stratification weights to match the sample to the U.S. population in terms of demographics. Some differences in the results did emerge, particularly in the models predicting *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*. These weighted results are shown and discussed in the online supplement.

<sup>11</sup> As but one example, models using unweighted poll data from SurveyMonkey predicted the results of the 2012 presidential election with 96% accuracy (Garland, 2012).



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**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

Variables	Mean	SD
<b>Dependent Variables</b>		
Support for punitive sex crime laws	5.22	1.31
Support for sex offender treatment	4.87	1.17
<b>Independent Variables</b>		
Victim-Oriented Concerns		
Perceived percent female	73.43	15.86
Perceived percent children	38.49	17.97
Relative harm to victims	3.43	.59
Sex Offender Stereotypes		
Perceived percent strangers	23.62	16.67
Unreformable	.57	.50
Immoral character	3.20	.88
Risk-Management Concerns		
Perceived sex crime trend	2.78	.90
Perceived lack of control	3.08	1.07
<b>Control Variables</b>		
Individual Characteristics		
Female	.51	.50
Parent	.28	.45
Married	.58	.49
White	.75	.43
Age	3.89	1.51
Education	2.84	1.07
Income	4.09	1.58
Conservatism	2.83	1.03
Religious	3.77	1.85
Sex crime victim	.26	.44
Local Area Characteristics		
Percent under 18	23.55	3.02
Number of RSOs	39.23	46.98
Percent republican	42.01	14.52
South	.34	.47

*ABBREVIATIONS:* SD = standard deviation; RSOs = registered sex offenders.

**Table 2. Analyses of the Effects of Select Predictors on Public Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Victim-Oriented Concerns</b>					
Perceived percent female	—	-.001	—	—	-.002
Perceived percent children	—	.010**	—	—	.006*
Relative harm to victims	—	.622***	—	—	.438***
<b>Sex Offender Stereotypes</b>					
Perceived percent strangers	—	—	.003	—	.005+
Unreformable	—	—	.995***	—	.835***
Immoral character	—	—	.383***	—	.323***
<b>Risk-Management Concerns</b>					
Perceived sex crime trend	—	—	—	.409***	.181**
Perceived lack of control	—	—	—	.089+	.054
<b>Individual Characteristics</b>					
Female	.473***	.318**	.337**	.349**	.199*
Parent	.273*	.230+	.169	.194	.131
Married	-.055	-.052	.068	-.008	.079
White	-.209	-.174	-.253+	-.246+	-.236+
Age	.034	.032	-.012	.000	-.020
Education	-.173**	-.144*	-.120*	-.133*	-.089+
Income	.007	.010	.035	.014	.036
Conservatism	.348***	.303***	.207***	.286***	.169**
Religious	.040	.039	.009	.032	.007
Sex crime victim	.020	.028	-.057	.019	-.036
<b>Local Area Characteristics</b>					
Percent under 18	.040*	.034+	.033	.036+	.028
Sqrt number of RSOs	-.018	-.007	-.011	-.015	-.002
Percent republican	.003	.005	.003	.003	.004
South	-.130	-.154	-.128	-.179	-.173
<b>Model Summary</b>					
R-squared	.180	.279	.387	.252	.457
Adjusted R-squared	.156	.253	.366	.227	.432

NOTE: Presented are unstandardized regression coefficients.

ABBREVIATIONS: RSOs = registered sex offenders.

+p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed significance test). N = 499.

**Table 3. Analyses of the Effects of Select Predictors on Public Support for Sex Offender Treatment**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Victim-Oriented Concerns</b>					
Perceived percent female	—	-.000	—	—	-.000
Perceived percent children	—	-.002	—	—	.002
Relative harm to victims	—	.030	—	—	.170*
<b>Sex Offender Stereotypes</b>					
Perceived percent strangers	—	—	.003	—	.003
Unreformable	—	—	-.827***	—	-.831***
Immoral character	—	—	-.206**	—	-.214**
<b>Risk-Management Concerns</b>					
Perceived sex crime trend	—	—	—	-.173**	-.065
Perceived lack of control	—	—	—	-.062	-.054
<b>Individual Characteristics</b>					
Female	-.107	-.113	.014	-.054	-.006
Parent	-.159	-.154	-.069	-.134	-.078
Married	.118	.116	.039	.096	.028
White	-.301*	-.313*	-.235*	-.287*	-.225+
Age	.017	.021	.056+	.033	.064+
Education	.091+	.086+	.063	.075	.066
Income	.062	.061	.042	.058	.039
Conservatism	-.243***	-.244***	-.154**	-.217***	-.155**
Religious	.004	.004	.017	.007	.017
Sex crime victim	-.091	-.093	-.017	-.089	-.012
<b>Local Area Characteristics</b>					
Percent under 18	-.019	-.019	-.013	-.017	-.013
Sqrt number of RSOs	.021	.021	.016	.019	.017
Percent republican	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
South	-.261*	-.258*	-.279*	-.239*	-.276*
<i>R</i> -squared	.104	.105	.249	.122	.259
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	.078	.073	.222	.093	.225

*NOTE:* Presented are unstandardized regression coefficients.

*ABBREVIATIONS:* RSOs = registered sex offenders.

+p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed significance test). *N* = 499.

## APPENDIX A

Given the demographic differences between our sample and the U.S. population, we explored whether a similar pattern of findings emerged after using post-stratification weights to match the survey sample to the U.S. population on key demographic characteristics (ethnicity, age, education, income). To do this, we used Bergmann's (2011) "ipfweight" command to generate the post-stratification weights in Stata through an iterative proportional fitting algorithm. We set the tolerance at .01 and trimmed weights to an upper threshold of 5. The weighted analyses are shown in Tables A1 and A2.

For the key findings of interest, the results from the weighted analyses were generally similar to those from the unweighted analyses, especially in the models predicting punitiveness. For example, both the unweighted and weighted results show that the *Perceived Percent Children*, *Relative Harm to Victims*, *Unreformable*, *Immoral Character*, and *Perceived Sex Crime Trend* variables significantly predict support for punitive approaches to controlling sex crime. Though, in the weighted results, the effects of the *Perceived Percent Children* and *Perceived Sex Crime Trend* variables in the full model were only marginally significant ( $p = .079$  and  $p = .095$ , respectively). Additionally, in both sets of results, the *Unreformable* variable is the strongest predictor of both punitiveness and negative views about sex offender treatment

The most notable differences between the weighted and unweighted results occurred in the models predicting *Support for Sex Offender Treatment*. Specifically, in the weighted results, the *Immoral Character* variable was not a significant predictor of support for treatment, but both the risk-management concerns variables emerged as significant predictors of reduced support. Despite these differences, we opted to report the unweighted analyses in the text for two reasons.

First, recent evidence shows that weighting opt-in internet samples can sometimes reduce the accuracy of findings (Yeager et al., 2011). Second, weighting requires difficult assumptions about the data (Groves et al., 2009), and can result in both a loss of precision and increased difficulty in interpreting regression coefficients (Gelman, 2007; Winship and Radbill, 1994).

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**Table A1. Weighted Analyses of the Effects of Select Predictors on Public Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Victim-Oriented Concerns</b>					
Perceived percent female	—	-.004	—	—	.001
Perceived percent children	—	.010*	—	—	.008+
Relative harm to victims	—	.568***	—	—	.393***
<b>Sex Offender Stereotypes</b>					
Perceived percent strangers	—	—	.001	—	.003
Unreformable	—	—	.996***	—	.859***
Immoral character	—	—	.461***	—	.405***
<b>Risk-Management Concerns</b>					
Perceived sex crime trend	—	—	—	.345***	.120+
Perceived lack of control	—	—	—	-.084	-.058
<b>Individual Characteristics</b>					
Female	.464**	.287+	.332*	.403*	.206
Parent	.713***	.675***	.501**	.536**	.432**
Married	-.029	.023	.125	-.092	.105
White	.267	.262	.071	.208	.100
Age	.014	.042	-.057	-.006	-.034
Education	-.245***	-.218**	-.151*	-.187**	-.114*
Income	.003	-.006	.021	.012	.013
Conservatism	.252**	.231**	.139*	.212**	.113+
Religious	.038	.014	.018	.051	.006
Sex crime victim	.121	.138	.033	.088	.052
<b>Local Area Characteristics</b>					
Percent under 18	.050+	.028	.025	.051*	.017
Sqrt number of RSOs	.011	.003	.005	.008	-.003
Percent republican	-.016*	-.015*	-.016*	-.017*	-.016**
South	-.197	-.312+	-.319*	-.250	-.396**
<i>R</i> -squared	.236	.338	.458	.288	.518
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	.214	.315	.439	.265	.496

*NOTE:* Presented are unstandardized regression coefficients.

*ABBREVIATIONS:* RSOs = registered sex offenders.

+p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed significance test). *N* = 499.

**Table A2. Weighted Analyses of the Effects of Select Predictors on Public Support for Sex Offender Treatment**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Victim-Oriented Concerns</b>					
Perceived percent female	—	.004	—	—	.005
Perceived percent children	—	.000	—	—	.005
Relative harm to victims	—	.073	—	—	.218+
<b>Sex Offender Stereotypes</b>					
Perceived percent strangers	—	—	.008	—	.006
Unreformable	—	—	-1.007***	—	-.934***
Immoral character	—	—	-.044	—	-.061
<b>Risk-Management Concerns</b>					
Perceived sex crime trend	—	—	—	-.320***	-.209*
Perceived lack of control	—	—	—	-.198**	-.170*
<b>Individual Characteristics</b>					
Female	-.195	-.228	-.077	-.079	-.085
Parent	-.496*	-.506*	-.285	-.435*	-.303+
Married	.253	.247	.125	.181	.078
White	-.520*	-.509*	-.260	-.424*	-.198
Age	-.068	-.063	.007	-.047	.026
Education	.007	.003	.008	.017	.021
Income	.125+	.122+	.105+	.103+	.086
Conservatism	-.195*	-.214*	-.148	-.168+	-.161+
Religious	.026	.028	.003	.031	.007
Sex crime victim	-.184	-.188	.024	-.179	.007
<b>Local Area Characteristics</b>					
Percent under 18	.011	.012	.027	.015	.025
Sqrt number of RSOs	.028	.027	.022	.021	.014
Percent republican	.002	.002	.001	.002	.001
South	-.422*	-.429*	-.329+	-.365*	-.336*
<b>Model Summary</b>					
R-squared	.156	.159	.318	.226	.362
Adjusted R-squared	.132	.130	.294	.201	.332

NOTE: Presented are unstandardized regression coefficients.

ABBREVIATIONS: RSOs = registered sex offenders.

+p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed significance test). N = 499.



**Appendix B. Principal-Component Factor Analysis Using Oblique Rotation of the Full Set of Items in Both Dependent Variables**

Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2
<b>Support for Punitive Sex Crime Laws</b>		
Making the names and addresses of sex offender available to the public.	.706	.086
Limiting where sex offenders can live.	.829	.080
Keeping sex offenders who are still considered dangerous locked up past...	.716	.095
Banning sex offenders from online social networking sites like Facebook.	.810	.102
Banning sex offenders from using the internet at all.	.770	-.008
Making sentences more severe for persons who commit sex crimes.	.798	.031
Giving the death penalty to repeat sex offenders	.604	-.229
<b>Support for Sex Offender Treatment</b>		
Expanding counseling programs for sex offenders in prison.	.098	.937
Expanding group therapy programs for sex offenders in prison.	.122	.934
Increasing taxes to pay for sex offender rehabilitation programs.	-.092	.583
Requiring employers with job openings to give an equal chance to sex...	-.371	.424
<b>Eigenvalue</b>	<b>4.138</b>	<b>2.428</b>

**Appendix C. Exploratory Factor Analysis Using Oblique Rotation of the Full Set of Independent Variables and Conservatism**

Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Uniqueness
Perceived percent female	.057	.169	.380	.001	.874
Perceived percent children	.223	.072	-.124	-.100	.876
Relative harm to victims	.317	.146	.016	-.083	.840
Perceived percent strangers	.054	-.030	.045	.206	.933
Unreformable	.322	.145	-.111	.072	.829
Immoral character	.510	-.090	.137	.007	.746
Perceived sex crime trend	.520	-.012	-.057	-.026	.721
Perceived lack of control	-.126	.372	.170	-.003	.883
Conservatism	.426	-.068	.184	.043	.793
Eigenvalue	.978	.312	.294	.233	—