5-11-2024

Attitudes and Perceptions of Sex Offenders Amongst Rural Populationns

Riley Allen
riley.allen@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses

Recommended Citation
Allen, Riley, "Attitudes and Perceptions of Sex Offenders Amongst Rural Populationns" (2024). Honors Theses. 486.
https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses/486

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.
ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SEX OFFENDERS AMONGST RURAL POPULATIONS

Riley G. Allen

A thesis submitted to the University Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Certificate with Thesis

Approved by
Dr. Tamara Kang
Assistant Professor, School of Psychological and Behavioral Sciences

Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
May 8, 2024
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the guidance and support of SIU psychology faculty members Dr. Tamara Kang and Dr. Alan Franklin, as well as the members of the BRC Lab at SIU Carbondale. These individuals helped immensely with getting my ideas onto paper, setting timelines, and keeping me motivated throughout the whole process. I would also like to thank Kayla Cooper, Olivia Cripps, and my other classmates in PSYC499 for their support, critiques, and for providing me with inspiration. Finally, I would like to give a special shoutout to my friends and family for having faith in my abilities as a researcher and for motivating me to keep going at all times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riley is a senior at SIU Carbondale working towards their B.A. in psychology with minors in forensic science and criminal justice. They are very involved in research through the ARC program as well as being an undergraduate research assistant in Dr. Tamara Kang’s BRC Lab. In addition to research, they are involved in many campus activities including the University Honors Program, PsiChi, and SIDC. After graduation in May 2024, they will be continuing their education at SIU as a master’s student in applied psychology.
ABSTRACT

The current study aims to examine rural residents’ attitudes regarding sex offenders and their perceptions of the recidivism rates of these types of individuals. Data from qualitative interviews of rural Illinois residents (N=24) will be used. This archival data will be coded with NVivo software to determine the prevalence of certain responses indicating positive or negative attitudes as well as perceptions of both adult and juvenile recidivism rates. Through the examination and analyses of the coded data, this study will help determine what kind of attitudes rural residents in southern Illinois harbor towards sex offenders and how that may correlate with perceived recidivism rates of both adults and juveniles with sex offenses.

Keywords: Sex offenders, rural residents, perceptions, attitudes, recidivism, adult and juvenile differences.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are over 786,000 registered sex offenders in the United States as of February 2023; a number that is about 3% higher than it was in 2022 (Gabriele, 2023). These numbers are widely available to the public through mandatory online sex offender registries which are present in all 50 states as of the 1994 Jacob Wetterling Act and the following 2006 Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). These two landmark cases in sex offender legislation involved the abductions of 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling in 1989 and 6-year-old Adam Walsh in 1981, respectively. Their disappearances sparked public outrage amongst parents all across the country fearing for the safety of their children and demanding that awareness of nearby sex offenders become more accessible. The cases of Jacob Wetterling and Adam Walsh, as well as the murder of 7-year-old Megan Kanka in 1994 (which would later be the namesake for Megan’s Law), had a direct effect on the policies put into place regarding sex offender registration and community notification standards. Title I of the Adam Walsh Act, the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), further strengthens these mandates, ensuring that the network of sex offender registries is secure, accurate, and easily accessible to the general public (Illinois Catalog of State Financial Assistance, n.d.).

As supported by the events that preceded the development of the Adam Walsh Act, as well as the Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan’s Law, many studies suggest that legal policies are often influenced by public attitudes and pressures that occur as responses to related events (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Tewksbury & Jennings, 2010). These attitudes, in turn, increase public support for certain types of policies, influencing policymakers to act according to what the public deems the most important and necessary (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). For crimes that are
particularly violent or towards a sensitive social group, such as children, public attitudes tend to be more negative, with the majority of individuals favoring a more punitive rather than rehabilitative approach for offenders of these types of crimes (Kernsmith et al., 2009). These types of attitudes and their correlation to support of certain policies can be observed through a study conducted by Burton et. al. in 2020 which reexamined the existing relationship between punitive opinions and public belief in the redeemability of sex offenders. By using viable measures of public punitiveness (Enns, 2016), redeemability (Maruna & King, 2009), and support for various types of prison reform initiatives, the team determined that belief in redeemability, rather than punitiveness, underlies support for certain rehabilitative policies such as the 2004 reentry movement (p.729).

As discussed in reference to type of crime, general public attitudes towards sex offenders tend to be more negative, as seen through the public’s reactions towards these individuals often consisting of emotions such as anger and disgust (Craun & Theriot, 2009; Kang et al., 2021; Kernsmith, Craun & Foster, 2009). However, attitudes have been found to vary amongst different social groups (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006). Rural residents, for example, tend to hold more punitive opinions. Due to the fact that conservative beliefs have been shown to play a significant role in the development of negative attitudes towards sex offenders (Rosselli and Jeglic, 2017), it is likely that the prevalence of overall conservative attitudes in these communities greatly contributes to these opinions (Mulrooney & Wise, 2019). Many of these negative views also are likely to stem from the belief that treatment, such as the administration of medication and various therapeutic approaches, are ineffective at successfully rehabilitating sex offenders. The existence of this particular belief is supported through various studies conducted to examine public attitudes regarding sex offender treatment and rehabilitation (Church et al.,
King and Payne et al., in two separate studies, found that many of their participants did not believe that rehabilitation of sex offenders was possible, favoring more punitive approaches rather than rehabilitative ones when it comes to their sentencing (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). These beliefs pose a direct contrast to many studies that suggest certain treatment methods, specifically those adhering to the risk, needs, responsivity model (RNR model; see Andrews et al., 1990), can be effective in successfully reducing sexual recidivism in many individuals (Beech et al., 2012; Zgoba & Levenson, 2008). Additionally, public perceptions on sex offender base rates also tend to be noncompliant with existing statistics regarding sex offender recidivism. A study from Hanson et al. (2018) found that sex offenders are no more likely to reoffend than non-sexual offenders after 10-15 years of being reintegrated back into the community, yet various other studies show that public perceptions of these statistics tend to be false; with the majority believing that sex offenders recidivate much more often than they do in actuality (King, 2016; Olver & Barlow, 2010).

For juveniles with a sex offense, there is not much research available concerning public attitudes and re-offense perceptions. In general, most studies show that attitudes towards juvenile sex offenders tend to be negative (Fuselier et al., 2002; Harper et al., 2017), however there have been reports suggesting that people tend to view adult offenders more negatively than juveniles who commit the same crimes (Harper, 2012; Sahlstrom & Jeglic, 2008). Attitudes towards juvenile offenders have certainly fluctuated over time, especially with the rise of the “youth superpredator” ideology in the mid-1990s, which heavily increased the negative attitudes associated with youth offenders (Brown Institute, 2020). In more recent years, beginning in the early 2000s, the U.S. has taken on more of the rehabilitative stance it harbored prior to the 1990s. At both the state and federal levels, many different legislation changes have been made to be
more lenient towards juvenile offenders (Esanu, 2023). While most individuals still believe that high-risk and dangerous offenders should be dealt with more punitively, there are still often differences in attitudes towards juvenile vs. adult offenders. This may be for a variety of reasons, but one of the most important factors in determining attitudes towards juvenile offenders is the perception that juveniles are more likely to benefit from treatment than adults. Other factors such as age at the time of offense, type of offense, and overall cognitive ability are also associated with attitudes towards juvenile offenders and what types of punishment are deemed appropriate (Trzcinski & Allen, 2012). Overall, though research regarding juveniles with sex offenses specifically is lacking, the general public tends to hold negative attitudes towards juvenile offenders while maintaining a distinction from adult offenders. Due to a wide variety of factors in favor of juvenile rehabilitative potential, people often think of juvenile offenders less punitively than adult offenders of the same crimes (Bolin et al., 2019).

Due to the discrepancies found between existent literature on sex offender recidivism and treatment efficacy, it is speculated that extreme negative attitudes regarding sex offenders are, in part, the product of widespread misconceptions about certain statistics and policies, such as recidivism rates and treatment effectiveness. The existence of these misconceptions can be attributed to a variety of different factors, including a lack of access to correct knowledge of the facts regarding sex offenders, individuals’ various belief systems, and personal experiences with sex offenders (Kang et al., 2021; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). In a 2021 study, Kang et al. examined some of the specific factors that can alter perceptions and attitudes regarding sex offender policies and practices in rural residents, specifically. They found personal experiences and emotions to be the most influential factors, with academics and peer articles, by contrast, having very little influence on rural resident’s attitudes (p. 359-397). The lack of proper knowledge
amongst individuals discussed by Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) was also found to be consistent with more negative attitudes towards sex offenders (p. 510). What remains to be determined is how a lack of knowledge affects the attitudes of rural individuals specifically, as the aforementioned study was conducted primarily on young female college students, which may prevent the results from being generalizable to other types of populations (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Additionally, rural residents are a very under-represented demographic in psychological studies, therefore generalizability to these populations may be compromised on that premise as well (O’Neal & Perkins, 2021). This lack of representation and generalizability, along with lower confidence in scientists and, overall, more conservative attitudes (Harley & Dunkley, 2018; Mulrooney & Wise, 2019), may combine with other limitations, such as lack of general resources (Community Paramedicine Introduction, 2014) to produce significant discrepancies between actual sex offender statistics and what they are perceived to be amongst rural populations.

The reviewed literature puts a strong emphasis on the importance of public attitudes on sex offender policy development and societal reintegration initiatives. As a result, more negative attitudes towards sex offenders often leads to increased support of more punitive and harsh treatment of those types of individuals upon sentencing. The factors that contribute to public perceptions and attitudes are extensive and are often fueled by misconceptions or incorrect information. Specifically, incorrect information on recidivism and base rate statistics is quite common amongst the general public, as are misconceptions that sex offenders are not able to benefit from rehabilitation initiatives. This differs slightly from the perceptions that are often harbored towards juvenile offenders, wherein they are more receptive to treatment approaches and rehabilitation. The lack of knowledge regarding policies, practices, and statistics, particularly in rural areas, can stem from both a mistrust in scientists and an overall lack of access to proper
resources such as public libraries and fast internet connections. Rural residents, being underrepresented in many areas of scientific research, require more specific focus to determine the ability to generalize findings to these types of specific populations.
METHODS

Participants

Archival data was used from a sample of rural residents (N=24) from government-defined rural areas in southern Illinois (*USDA ERA - Rural Classifications*, 2023). Of the 24 participants, the average age was 47 ($M = 46.93; \ SD = 17.25$, range 18 to 86). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed with NVivo, and double-checked by undergraduate research assistants. Any and all identifiable information was redacted or omitted prior to the coding process.

Measures

Attitudes

Due to the data being archival, it is unable to apply to existing measures of attitudes/beliefs. Thus, client attitudes towards sex offenders were coded in NVivo as either positive, negative, or undetermined based on individual responses to the following question: “Often tax dollars are allocated to provide individuals with government-funded financial assistance. Do you think individuals [with a sex offense] who have been released from incarceration should have access to these government-funded financial opportunities?” Responses in the affirmative, as well as the client’s elaboration, were deemed as positive attitudes, and vice versa for negative attitudes. If a client is unsure, their attitudes were coded as such. In addition, responses that are inaudible, unclear, or do not fall into any of the three coding categories were not included in the three measures of attitudes and were coded as “other” or “inaudible”. Coding options for client reasonings were provided based on what responses were given in the various transcriptions.
Perceptions of Recidivism Rates

In order to examine how often participants believe that adult and juvenile sex offenders reoffend, the responses to the following questions were coded; “How often do you think adults with a sex offense reoffend?” and “How often do you think youth with a sex offense reoffend?” Participant responses typically consisted of either a quantitative percentage or a qualitative probability expression such as “often”, “occasionally”, etc. In order to properly analyze and compare the two types of responses, I utilized a scale developed by Reagan et al. (1989) to accurately quantify the verbal responses as a percentage. This particular scale and its predecessors use the probability meaning behind key words such as “unlikely”, “very likely”, and “moderate chance” in order to attribute a percentage of likelihood to these types of responses. For this study, I included eight different 10%-15% intervals ranging from “No Chance” (0%) to “Certain to Happen” (100%) in the qualitative codebook. These codes were used to measure perceived adult sex offender recidivism rates, along with general codes for inaudible and “other” responses that do not fit into any of the other available codes. For juvenile perceived recidivism rates, codes of comparison were included in the codebook in addition to the likelihood codes developed from the Reagan et al. scale. These additional comparison codes, “More than adults”, “Less than adults”, and “the same as adults”, were used to directly compare perceived adult vs. juvenile risk to reoffend. As with the codebook used for adult risk, codes for inaudible and “other” responses were available as well.

Procedure

Codebook development was conducted by the primary researcher through both inductive and deductive processes utilizing the available literature regarding attitudes towards sex
offenders and perceptions of re-offense rates. The data passed through one round of coding using the developed codebook. Due to the cases being coded by the same individual, there was no need for measures of interrater reliability.

Aims and Hypotheses

**Aim 1**: Examine the attitudes that rural residents harbor towards sex offenders.

**Hypothesis 1**: Based on existing literature surrounding rural resident beliefs and attitudes, it is hypothesized that rural residents will hold more negative than positive attitudes towards sex offenders. This will result in high perceived risks to reoffend for adult sex offenders, as well, due to the relationship between re-offense rates and punitive attitudes, as suggested by previous literature.

**Aim 2**: Examine the perceptions of rural residents towards the recidivism rates of adult and juvenile sex offenders and see how they compare with one another.

**Hypothesis 2**: Rural residents will believe that, in general, juvenile sex offenders reoffend at lower rates than adult sex offenders based on the relationship that exists between punitive attitudes and perceived risk to reoffend as well as previous research findings regarding attitudes towards juvenile vs. adult offenders.

RESULTS

Aim one of this study examined the attitudes that rural residents have towards sex offenders in general. A qualitative directed content analysis was conducted and of the 24 cases included in this study, 13 clients exhibited positive attitudes towards sex offenders. In the context of the utilized codebook, these individuals believed that those with sex offenses deserve
government-funded financial assistance upon release from prison. The following quote from one participant helps exemplify these beliefs; “I think that they need help…and that probably being in prison didn’t help them a whole lot.”

Four participants endorsed negative attitudes. Those that endorsed negative attitudes did not believe sex offenders were deserving of government-funded financial assistance; “Sex offenders should not be released, and they should not get benefits of any kind.” Another reason for negative attitudes was given by those who believe sex offenders should be punished more harshly; “My personal opinion is they don’t need to be living. If they’re a sex offender, they do not need to be walking this earth.”

The remaining participants (n = 6) stated that their attitudes depend on various factors, such as victim demographic, individual rehabilitative qualities, and crime severity. Illustratively, one participant said:

“There’re different levels of it. I had a friend that was a registered sex offender because he was taking a leak on a side of a bar in [redacted place] at 3 in the morning, and the cops seen him, and he got indecent exposure.”

The remaining 1 participant did not provide a response that fit into the three categories, which warranted a code of “Other”, and is considered missing data.

Aim two of the study examined rural resident perceptions of re-offense rates for both adult and juvenile sex offenders and how the two can compare. Perceived rates were considered low if participants believed that 50% or less offenders re-offend. Likewise, perceived rates were categorized as high if participants answered 51% or above. For adult sex offenders, many participants (n = 10) believed that they reoffend at high rates regardless of whether they hold positive or negative attitudes. For those with positive attitudes, 37% believe that they reoffend at
high rates, while only 16% believe that they have a low risk of reoffending. These results were quite similar compared to participants with negative attitudes and those who said their attitudes depended on various factors including victim demographic, individual rehabilitation, or up to case-by-case discretion. These two types of responses (participants with negative attitudes and participants whose attitudes were coded into “It depends”) were grouped together in order to provide a proper comparison to the large number of those in the positive attitude group. For the combined negative/depends group, 50% believed that adults reoffend at high rates, and there were no counts of low perceived risk, marking the most major difference compared to the beliefs of the “positive attitude” group. Similar to the perceptions of adult re-offense rates, juvenile sex offender rates stayed consistent across the two attitude groups (positive and negative/depends). For those with positive attitudes, 31% believed that juveniles reoffend at high rates, while 16% believed they reoffend at low rates. These numbers are very similar in those with negative/depends-on attitudes; 33% believed they reoffend at high rates, while 17% believed the risk was low. In order to stay relevant to the study’s aims, those who answered the perceived risk questions with answers that did not fit into the categories of high and low risk (answers such as “other”, “inaudible”, “unsure”) were not included in the content analysis. This included a total of six participants.

**DISCUSSION**

With this study, I hoped to examine the attitudes that rural residents harbor towards sex offenders, as well as how often they believe both adult and juvenile sex offenders reoffend. Prior to the study, I had believed that those with negative attitudes would outnumber those with positive attitudes. Additionally, I had believed that participants would believe that juvenile sex
offenders recidivate at lower rates when compared to adults. After conducting a qualitative directed content analysis of the coded participant data, I found that the majority of participants \( n = 13 \) held positive attitudes, while only 4 held distinctly negative attitudes, which is contrary to my proposed hypothesis. Participants also believed that juvenile sex offenders recidivate at mostly high rates, similarly to adults. Additionally, it was found that the proportions of participants who believe adult and juvenile sex offenders reoffend at certain rates was consistent across the two attitude categories (positive and negative/it depends attitudes). Overall, regardless of whether rural residents hold positive or negative attitudes, or whether those attitudes depend on certain circumstances, most people were found to believe that both adult and juvenile sex offenders reoffend at high rates (over 50%).

**Comparison of Qualitative Findings to the Extant Literature**

The present study’s findings regarding belief in sex offender re-offense rates were similar to the quantitative findings of Salerno et al. (2010), who found that participants believed that both adult and juvenile sex offenders reoffend at high rates regardless of the attitudes that they held towards these individuals. Further supporting these conclusions are studies by King (2016) and Olver & Barlow (2010) which both suggest that people tend to believe that sex offenders recidivate at much higher rates than other types of offenders, despite this not always being the case (Hanson et al., 2018). The mentioned studies by King and Olver & Barlow utilized samples of Pennsylvanian residents and undergraduate college students, respectfully, and found results similar to those of the current study despite the differences in demographics. This suggests that these types of attitudes and misconceptions are widespread amongst different types of populations in the U.S.
Contrary to the proposed hypothesis that believed there would be a larger presence of negative attitudes amongst the participants, the majority of participants held relatively positive attitudes ($n = 13$) while only 4 held definitively negative attitudes. Previous research typically suggests that this would not be the case, especially amongst rural populations who tend to harbor more conservative, and therefore punitive, views (Mulrooney & Wise, 2019; Rosselli and Jeglic, 2017). There are a variety of factors that can contribute to why these findings differ from extant literature, including the wording of the measuring question, the way in which the responses were coded, or human errors such as desirability biases.

The proposed hypothesis stating that participants would believe juvenile sex offenders recidivate less than adults was also rejected, as both were mostly believed to reoffend at high rates (more than 50% of the time). However, there are a few small differences in the results that help provide some support to the hypothesis. Though the proportions of high to low re-offense risk stay consistent for juvenile perceptions across the two attitude groups, compared to the perceptions of adult re-offense for those with negative/depends-on attitudes, there is a distinct difference in that there is a presence of those who perceive low risk for juveniles. No one with reported negative/depends-on attitudes believed that adults reoffend at low rates, but 17% of perceptions for juvenile risk consisted of those with negative/depends-on attitudes assuming low risk. This suggests that while juvenile perceptions may not vary between attitude groups, there is still a difference compared to adults amongst those who hold negative attitudes towards sex offenders or those whose attitudes depend on various factors.

Should this study be replicated, more consideration for the reasonings behind certain attitudes could be examined. While subcodes and child codes were available in the utilized codebook, they were not included in a majority of the content analyses. I believe that examining
the various nuances behind why people feel the way they do about sex offenders could provide valuable insight into efforts to aid reintegration. Additionally, the effects of both participant and sex offender demographics would also potentially yield useful information.

CONCLUSION

Based on the current study and the observed results, we can better understand how rural residents view sex offenders, a very heavily stigmatized group of individuals. By knowing where their beliefs lie and how they differ from extant literature and statistical findings, misinformation can potentially be corrected moving forward. Educational resources in rural communities can be utilized to do so, as long as the effort is made to implement these things. Doing so would help reduce stigma and negative attitudes as well as allow for easier reintegration of sex offenders into the community. Easier reintegration, in turn, can result in reduced levels of recidivism of these populations, due to a decrease in stressors associated with acclimating back into communities. This would not only allow for society as a whole to become safer for potential victims, but it would increase the quality of life of those with sex offenses, even further reducing the likelihood of recidivism amongst these populations.
REFERENCES


Esanu, A. (2023). *Between Rehabilitation and Punishment: America’s Approach to Juvenile Justice*. Harvard Undergraduate Law Review. https://hulr.org/spring-2023/2g7c8rih423qwpyjrm1se2s5rt7p5m


