

**SEXUAL OFFENDER NOTIFICATIONS WITHIN THE  
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA COMMUNITY**


**By  
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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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## **Abstract**

When a sexual offender is released from jail or prison, certain guidelines and rehabilitative goals must be met. In large part, this is exercised through the Sexual Offender Notification System. This study seeks to obtain empirical data surrounding the University students reaction to the Sexual Offender Notification System, specifically that of the undergraduate population. Data on one hundred and ninety-six undergraduate participants' prior experiences with and exposure to sexual offenders have been collected along with their affective and behavioral reactions that may occur upon receiving a Sexual Offender Notification. In total, there were 476 acts of prior exposure, 41 acts of which were deemed "personal exposure". The highest endorsed emotions were disgust, anger, and distrust, and the most common behavioral reactions were increasing home security, educating cohabitants, and installing a new alarm system, with females being more likely to discuss safety, install an alarm, and take a self-defense course. Surprisingly, there was no correlation between prior exposure to sexual offenders and affective or behavioral reactions upon receiving a notification.

Keywords: reintegration, Sexual Offender Notification System, prior exposure.

## **Introduction**

Legislation requires that convicted sexual offenders register, and are subject to, various levels of community notification. Members of the public can, via computer, learn the identities, whereabouts, and other pertinent information of the convicted sex offenders that are in their community by entering their zip code.

In 1994, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act was established, requiring all states to implement a registration program for convicted sexual offenders (Staff, 2010). Megan's Law, an enactment of state legislature enforcing that notifications be distributed to any neighbors within a convicted offenders established location, was later reconfigured to include public Internet access to said information (Staff, 2010). This law has spread to separate state legislatures, resulting in multiple similar statutes to be enacted across the country.

Arizona requires convicted sexual offenders to provide identifying information, assessed levels of risk, and either the date of release or the date that the sentence was imposed to the registry (ARS, 2010). The Pima County Sheriff's Department has allowed Internet access to this information, along with fundamental information regarding current statutes and access to geographical maps depicting current offender location (Prevention, 2010). The University of Arizona Police Department fulfills the requirements of ARS 13-3825, stating that local law enforcement must include the campus community in the notification process of a sexual offender (Campus, 2010). They do this through ensuring that any offender registers with the campus upon receiving enrolling as a student or being employed

on the campus. This information is made accessible through the public University websites.

Initiation of the sexual offender notification system has largely been in response to public outcries instead of empirical data. The goal of the legislation is to protect members of society however there is a dearth of empirical literature as to whether these policies are in deed making our society safer. It is imperative that social scientists examine the impact of these policies, because statutes and “policy based on misinformation and fear may lead to increased fear levels potentially dangerous consequences, including increased rates of recidivism” (Prescott & Rockoff, 2008). However, prior research on the Sexual Offender Registration and Notification Policy has discovered a correlation between the increasing rates of surveillance by the community of law enforcement agencies and the decreasing rates of recidivism in convicted sexual offenders (LaFond, 2005).

The experimenters hypothesized that prior exposure to a sexual offender would influence both emotional and behavioral reactions of individuals after receiving a sexual offender notification. Specifically, the investigators expected to find a positive relationship between interpersonal prior exposure to sexual offenders, and the negative affective response paired with a defensive physical response of increased home security. The investigators also believed that the more input the public had in the notification process, the higher the positive personal impact would be of the individual citizen.

## **Participants**

This study included 196 participants (134 female, 62 male), all of whom were undergraduate students from the University of Arizona. Students participated in obtain course credit within the introductory Psychology courses. This study consisted of an online survey, and all participants were debriefed at the end of the study. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

## **Materials and Procedure**

Participants for this study were allowed to sign up in the undergraduate psychology data pool, subjectively choosing studies to fulfill their necessary requirements. The study was presented as the Community Threat Questionnaire: Parts I (survey) and II (debriefing). This allowed participants a general understanding of the study's nature without employing any highly sensitized terms, in an attempt to control for any participants that may have been drawn towards sexual terms, and to avoid any unnecessary increase in the chance of bias. Participants then signed up for time slots to complete Parts I and II, individually. The link to Part I, the online survey, was e-mailed to them by the investigators of the study, to be completed prior to attending Part II, the in-person debriefing.

The online survey began with a consent form, addressing the study's basic information, reasoning, layout and duration, risk or benefits, and confidentiality. Given the personal nature of the study, every available precaution was taken to ensure that privacy remained a central focus and that anonymity through responses was consistently kept. Contact information for the principal investigator, advisor,

and co-investigators was provided for addressing any questions or concerns, along with information for the police department, National Sexual Assault Hotline, Southern Arizona Mental Health Clinic, and Counseling and Psychological Services at the University of Arizona.

The next section included basic demographic information, such as age, gender, highest attained educational level, employment status, sexual orientation, marital status, housing, race, religion, and primary language.

An educational intervention was randomly distributed in the survey, to be taken before the stimulus sets, prior exposure and/or criminal/drug record. This included the general laws underlying the Sexual Offender Notification system, their basic development in the past few decades, and the social influence that the policies have adopted. This was followed by a manipulation check, established to ensure that participants thoroughly read, and were able to understand, the educational intervention.

The stimulus sets include three authentic Sexual Offender Notifications, selected in accordance to varying race, crime, date of offense, and victim of perpetrator. The only two factors that remained consistent were that of offender level (three) and when the offense occurred (within the past twelve months). These were chosen for their ecological validity and in order to elicit stronger responses. Adjacent to the notifications, participants were prompted on their emotional and behavioral reactions to viewing said images. On the affective scales, all levels and types of emotions were included, ranging from joy to disgust to indifference. The physical actions were categorized into those of a defensive nature (changing the

locks), those of an educational nature (town meeting), or those of a welcoming nature (through a letter or meeting).

Prior experiences were surveyed in regards to sexual offender exposure. The provided options included: print media, electronic media, active electronic social networking, or in-person, interpersonal communications and dealings. Participants were asked if they had ever been a victim of a sexual offense or a perpetrator of a sexual offense and the relevant details such as time period or offender classification level. Criminal history, history of drug consumption, and general alcohol consumption were all also queried.

A battery of psychological surveys, all related to the general interest points of the thesis topic, were given, including: the Liking People Scale, the Proactive Coping Scale, the Multidimensional Support Scale, and the Rape Aftermath Symptoms Test.

Lastly, the participants were asked to provide feedback on the Sexual Offender Notification system. This information will be compiled in aggregate form to ensure anonymity, and be submitted to the local law enforcement agencies in attempts to improve the current system.

After completing the online segment, participants were required to attend an in-person debriefing. Here, the general information and reasoning behind the study was explained, along with an overview of the experiment's sections and their rationale. Throughout the debriefing, participants were encouraged to ask about any questions or voice any concerns that they may have had. The importance of privacy and the precautions taken to preserve it was reiterated, along with the further implications that this study will hold. The principal investigators, co-

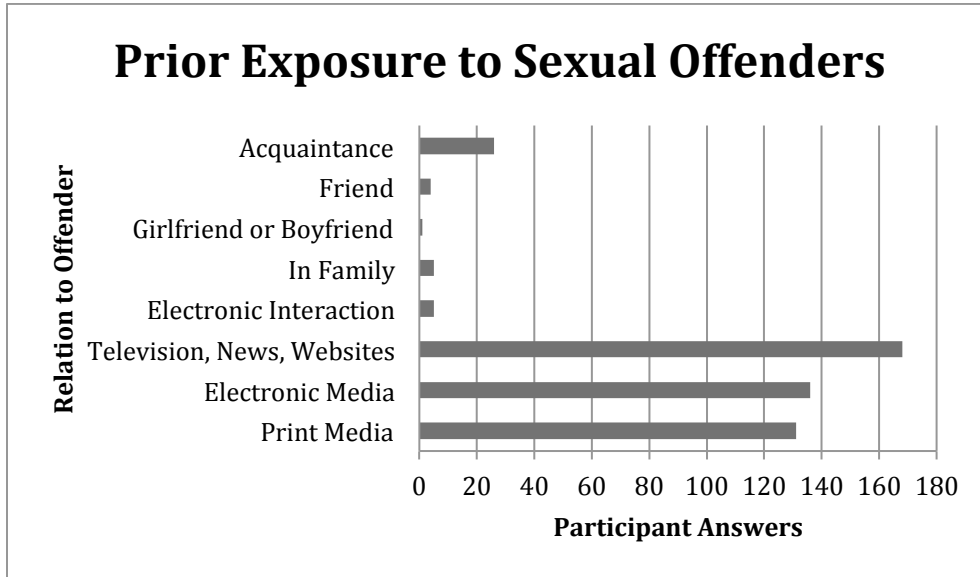


investigators, and advisor's contact information was again provided along with the Arizona Campus Health Services contact information.

## **Results**

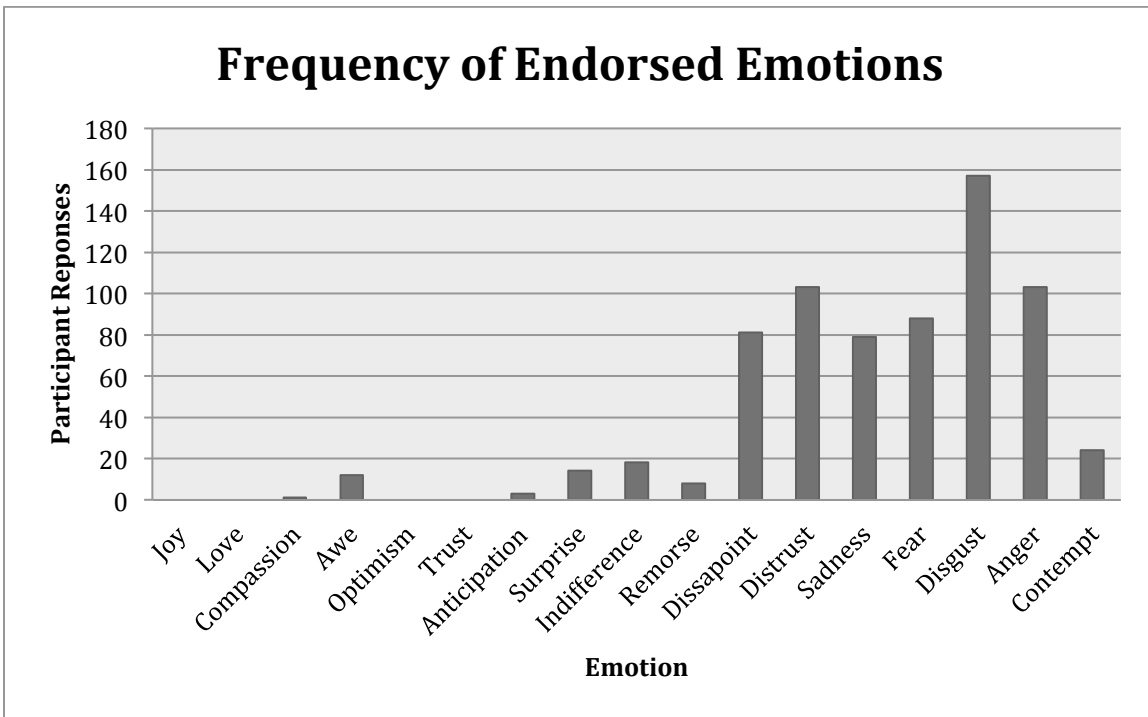
The following are the demographic characteristics of the participants: 31.6% of the participants were male, and 68.4% of participants were female. The mean age was 18.99 years, with a standard deviation of 1.876 years. Forty point four percent of the participants had completed at least their first year of college, and 88.1% were currently in their first year. Seventy-two point three percent of the participants were Caucasian, and 92.1% spoke English as a first language. Ninety-seven point five percent identified as heterosexual. Seventy point four percent of the participants were single. Lastly, 48.4% of the participants identified as Christian.

Participants reported a wide array of different types of exposure to sexual offenders, though most of the exposures were through forms of media. Upon query, the participants were able to choose as many forms of exposure as they had experienced. The 41 acts of interpersonal exposure included; acquaintances (n=26), friends (n=4), a significant other (n=1), family members (n=5), or electronic interaction (n=5). The remaining 435 acts were exposure through the television, news, or web (n=168), electronic media (n=136), or print media (n=131).



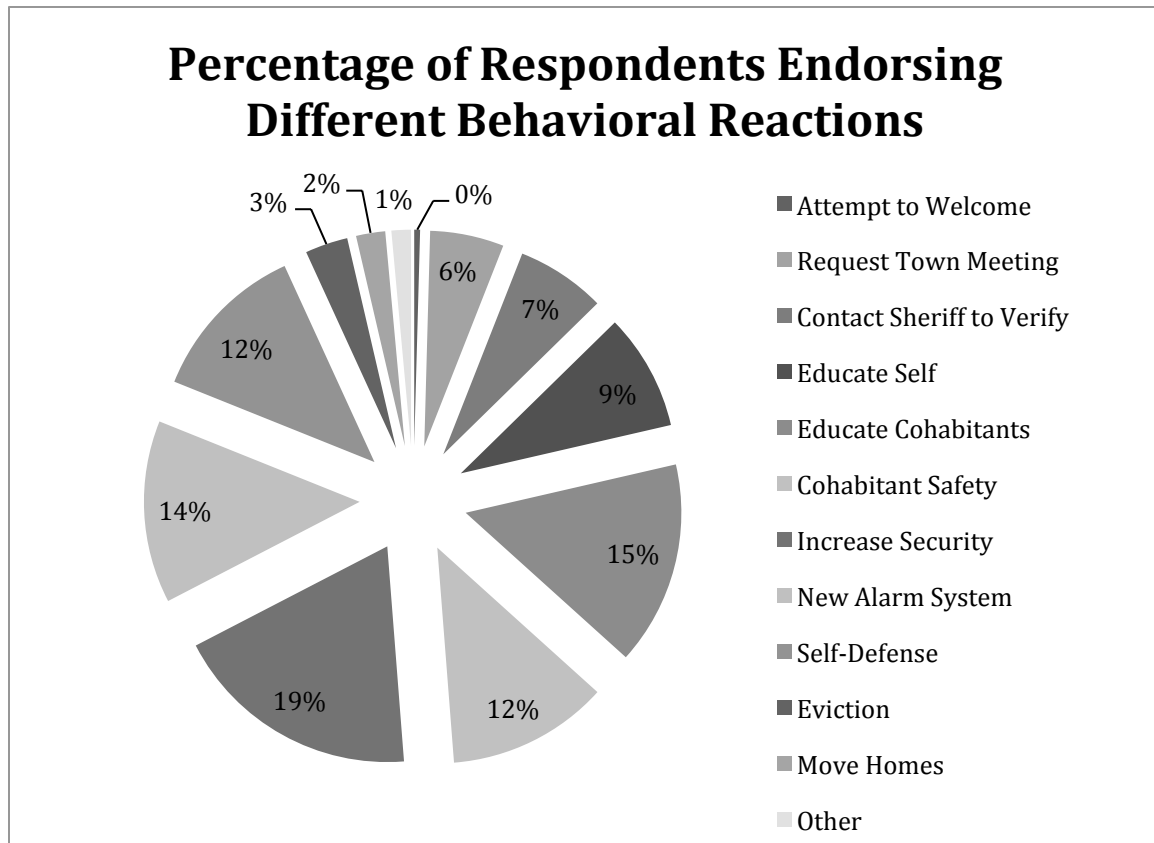
Overall, the participants tended to endorse negative emotional feedback.

Disgust ranked highest (n=157), then anger (n=103) and distrust (n=103).



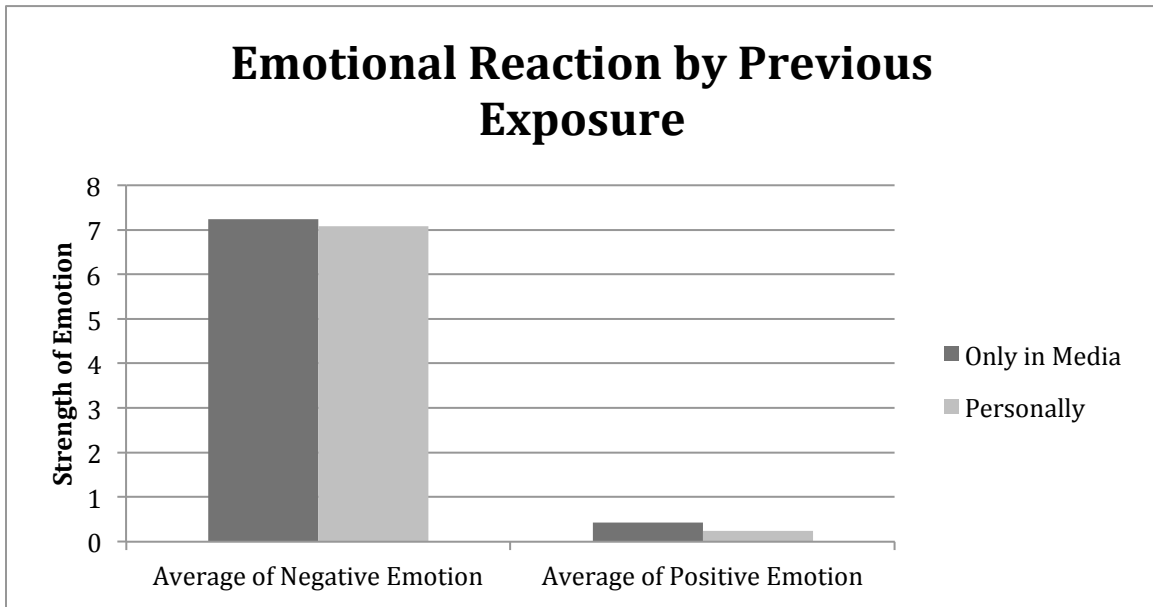
The top behavioral reactions to the stimulus set were increasing home security through changing locks, reinforcing doors, etc. (n=37), educating

cohabitants as to the presence of the sex offender (n=29), and installing a new alarm system (n=27).

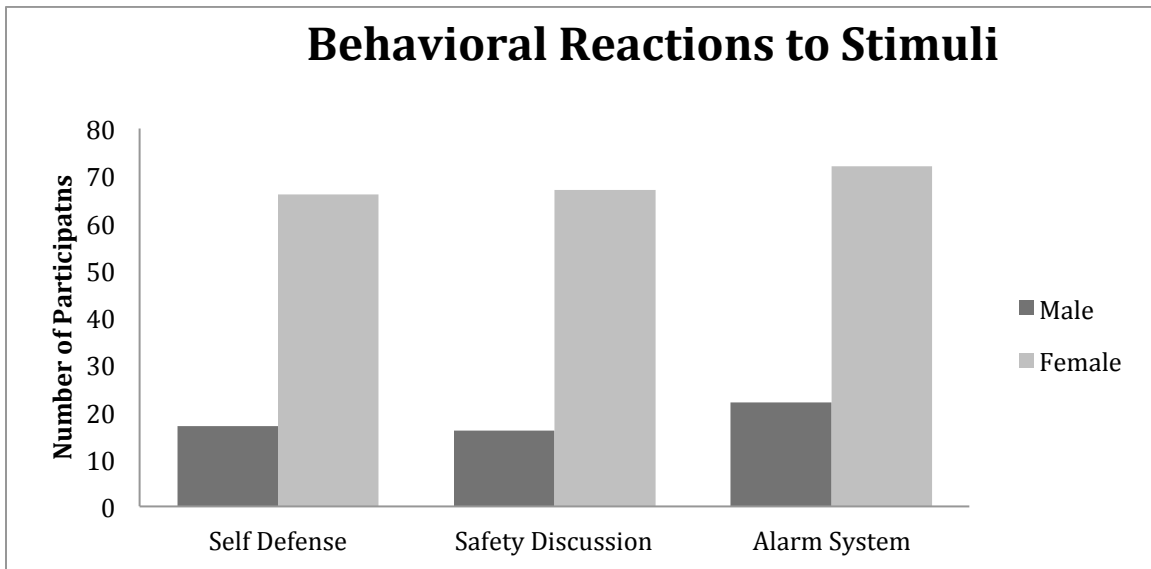


Participants were divided based on their previous experience with offenders. Those with any personal experience were placed in one category (N=40) and those without any personal experience in another (N=156). Additionally, the emotional responses that participants were asked to endorse were collapsed onto two scales ranging from neutral feelings to extreme positive emotions (a scale of 0 to 9) and another scale to extreme negative emotions (a scale of 0 to 9). The average level of positive emotion was .388 (SD= 1.225) and the average level of negative emotion was 7.204 (SD=1.913). Comparisons were not made between due to the extremeness of the differences.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the report of negative or positive emotion differed based whether the participant reported having had previous personal contact with sex offenders. No significant difference between the groups was identified for positive emotions [F(1,194)=.635, p=.427] nor negative emotions [F(1,194)=.228, p=.634].



A series of chi-square analyses were conducted to determine whether there were any differences in the behavioral reactions based on type of previous contact. However, there were no significant results. There was an effect of gender. Females were more likely than males to discuss safety with their cohabitants [ $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 10.162, p = .002$ ], install alarm systems in their home [ $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 5.655, p = .021$ ], and take a self defense courses [ $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = .256, p = .005$ ].



Due to technical errors within the survey provider’s website, three of the four surveys from the provided battery were deemed incalculable due to an incomplete presentation within the survey’s display. The fourth survey, the Rape Aftermath Symptom Test (RAST) maintained 90% of its original questions, and therefore was included in the survey’s overall analysis. To control for the missing seven questions, original means were analyzed by percentage, instead of direct value, in order to equate them to the study’s results.

## Discussion

Demographic characteristics were similar to that of the undergraduate population within the introductory psychology classes at the University. Originally, the principal investigator had intentions of solely including in-person exposure to sexual offenders as a part of the survey, but the data would have been too small to have any true effects. As remains, the “personal” exposure to sexual offenders is still

high in comparison, at 41 acts of “personal” exposure reported by 196 participants, allowing the investigators enough information to conduct a series of correlations and statistical examinations.

The participants endorsed the range of negative emotions much more so than any of the neutral or positive emotions provided, as was hypothesized by the investigators.

Behavioral reactions were classified into three different categories. All of the available options fell within either: educational (n=251), defensive (n=432), or welcoming (n=3). As hypothesized, the highest endorsed reaction was that of a defensive nature. The increase of home security was found to be highly specific to females, along with installing alarm systems and taking a self-defense course.

Due to the nature of the survey website, the investigators were unable to tell which of the participants received the educational intervention, and when it was randomly distributed. Therefore, the effect that it may or may not have had upon the participants’ reactions was undeterminable.

Out of the variety of psychological surveys provided within the latter portion of the study, three were negated due to their improper input into the online survey system. Two of these surveys recorded only half of the actual questions needed, and therefore were unable to be analyzed. These two were the Proactive Coping Scale (Knoll, 407), and the Liking People Scale (Fischer, 325). The third survey was the Multidimensional Support Scale, which did not support any form of correlation given the nature of its chosen format, and therefore had no relevance to the study (Fischer, 395). The final survey, the Rape Aftermath Symptom Test (RAST) is

considered a successful psychological instrument in the detection of rape-related symptoms (Fischer, 465).

The investigators cross-correlated the RAST data with prior personal exposure to sexual offenders, comparing the results to Kilpatrick's (1988) study (Fischer, 465). When cross-correlated with personal prior exposure to sexual offenders, three free response answers were incorporated into the data; an ex-communicated friend and an ex-boyfriend of a sibling were both put into 'friend', whilst a sex offender that anonymously approached a participant on the street was categorized as 'acquaintance'.

The RAST has "excellent known-groups validity, significantly distinguishing between victims and non-victims at all of the time periods described" (Fischer, 464). As a whole, each of the personal exposures to sexual offenders fell within the range of Kilpatrick's (1988) study, ranging from six days to three years after a rape. Yet, in this light, the group of "non-victim" to sexual offender also fell well within the established range. This may be due to the nature of the study's population: with sixty-eight point four percent of the participants being female, undergraduate college students, there may be issues of personal protection, identity formation, and continual exploration of the human sexuality that have influenced the results of the RAST battery.

The free response segment at the end of the survey was created with the intention of improving the current system. Relevant feedback will be gathered into aggregate form and submitted to the Pima County Sheriff's Department, in hopes of

sparking any positive changes to the Sexual Offender Notification System. A sample of the recorded quotes are as follows:

“I believe that while the sex offenders have done something terrible in their past, the reason they are able to live around people again is because they have under-gone psychiatric help and have been approved by them. By requiring people to register as a sex offender, it reduces the chances of them really ever having a normal life because they will constantly be judged. However, it also depends on what degree of sex offender they are. If you are disturbed enough to be labeled as one of the worse kinds of sex offenders then they should be required to register. So I think there should be a limit to who needs to be registered so those who committed lesser crimes can have a chance at a normal life because they have a bigger chance of recovery.”

“I can not say I know enough about the system to offer critical feedback.”

“I believe that it is unfair to many people to have sexual offenders living in their neighborhoods, around their children.”

“The Sexual Offender Notification system is a good program. It lets people know who is a registered sex offender and what they look like. And it gives them their background and everything so innocent people know who is and what they look like.”



“I think it's pretty good, perhaps there should be some rebuttal on the part of the sex offender however, in some states urinating in public is a sexual offense and you are a sex offender, and it is important to know that.”

The responses provided within the free response segment support the investigators' original concerns of the highly varied and opinionated approaches the different individuals of this society take in regards to sexual offenders and the currently enforced notification system. The topics of an educational opportunity, or the lack of current public knowledge, along with a lack of input from the sexual offenders themselves, are addressed.

Given the results of the study, the investigators believe it to be imperative to continue to explore the potential effects of the sexual offender notification system on the public, as well as on the offender. Future research can also explore the effects of a randomly assigned educational intervention to accompany the notifications. The addition of personal vignettes from the offenders may also be distributed in order to measure their impact on the citizens. The investigators witnessed a floor effect upon the affective reactions towards the stimulus sets. The question then becomes, through which means would an educational intervention or personal vignette become a useful tool towards the system.

This pilot study provides information on how undergraduate college students respond behaviorally and emotionally when presented with information regarding sexual offenders. Given that a number of sexual offenders have been subject to harassment and, on occasion, violence, it is imperative that future research focus on ways to educate the public about potential public safety issue

whilst, simultaneously, attempting to make the reintegration of sexual offenders a more positive experience for them given that stress, loneliness, and other negative factors of reception have been implicated as risk factors for recidivism.

As typical with undergraduate theses, one of the largest limitations within the study is that of the subject pool. Given the limited resources available, the population is biased towards a younger, educated, and generally female group of participants. Another major limitation within this study proved to be that of the online survey, and specifically the format of the chosen survey provider. Although aesthetically pleasing, the interface is not easily manipulated in regards to statistical analyses.

Further limitations existed within the original formatting of the survey. Had the investigators chosen to dichotomize the different types of exposure, and allow participants to rate experiences as positive or negative, more relevant information would have been made available upon analysis.

The team of investigators is currently in the process of resubmitting forms for IRB approval, inclusive of the aforementioned changes, and with the long-term goals in mind for the ultimate development of the Sexual Offender Notification System.

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