

Myths and Facts About Sexual Violence: Public Perceptions and Implications for Prevention

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Sex crime prevention policies are influenced by public opinion about sexual violence, and by the belief that such policies are effective in reducing or preventing sexual recidivism. It has been suggested that the public perceptions and attitudes in this area are based in part on popular myths and misconceptions. The current study examines public perceptions about sexual violence by exploring endorsements of “myths” and “facts.” Data were collected from an online survey posted on a nation-wide community message board that canvassed 15 states in the U.S. Results suggested that while many community members are fairly well informed about some aspects of sexual violence, certain items were commonly misconstrued. Public attitudes about sexual violence and the implications for victim advocacy and public policy are discussed.

Keywords: sexual abuse, sexual assault, public perception, community survey, prevention

INTRODUCTION

Sex crimes inspire much fear and anxiety in our society and as a result a number of criminal justice policies have been implemented to protect community members from sexual victimization (LaFond, 2005; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007; Wright, 2003). The Jacob Wetterling Act was passed in 1994 to establish registration of convicted sex offenders for monitoring purposes, and was amended in 1996 to allow dissemination of registry information directly to the public. Community notification, also known as “Megan’s Law,” has increased public awareness about sex offenders living among us. As well, enormous media attention is paid to sexual violence, and especially newsworthy are random crimes against children involving abduction and murder. Attention to sensational sex crimes tends to paint a somewhat inaccurate picture of the nature of child sexual abuse and those who perpetrate it and therefore many of the policies to combat sexual violence are based on myths or misunderstanding about the sex offender population (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Sample & Kadleck, 2006;2008). The purpose of this study was to explore public perceptions about sex offenders and sexual abuse, and to identify beliefs that may be particularly distorted.

Common beliefs about sexual assault

High recidivism rates are often cited in media reports and legislative intentions (Sample & Bray, 2003;2006). Though sexual reoffending is certainly a legitimate cause for concern, several large studies by both the U.S. and Canadian governments suggest that sex offense recidivism rates are lower than commonly believed (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Bussiere, 1996;1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Harris & Hanson, 2004). On average, 5-14% of known sex offenders will be rearrested for a new sex crime within three to six years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). Even over longer follow-up periods of fifteen years, the majority (76%) of sexual offenders do not go on to sexually recidivate (Harris & Hanson, 2004). Although it is a widely accepted belief that sex offenders are more repetitive and violent than other criminals, data show that they are among the least likely criminals to be rearrested for new crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003;2006) or to kill their victims (Sample, 2006).

On the other hand, there is evidence that the majority of sexual assaults are not brought to the attention of the criminal justice system (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, Murphy, & Rouleau, 1987; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005; English, Jones, Pasini-Hill, Patrick, & Cooley-Towell, 2000). Some sex offenders assault many more victims than those for which they are caught, and they may target victims of various ages and both genders (Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003; Levenson, Becker, & Morin, 2008). Many victims, especially children, do not report sexual abuse (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). Though few child sexual abusers use force or violence to gain compliance, victims may not disclose because they have a relationship with the abuser, fear the consequences of reporting, or hold a flawed belief that they share some blame for the assault (Salter, 1995).

Skepticism about the ability of sex offenders to benefit from treatment also fuels fear about sex crime. Several sophisticated experimental designs have failed to detect significantly different reoffense rates between treated and untreated sex offenders (Hanson, Broom, & Stephenson, 2004; Marques, Wiederanders, Day, Nelson, & van Ommeren, 2005). Other meta-analytic studies, however, have found that contemporary cognitive-behavioral treatment with a relapse prevention component can decrease sex offense recidivism (Hanson, Gordon, Harris, Marques, Murphy, Quinsey, & Seto, 2002; Losel & Schmucker, 2005). Hanson et al. (2002) found that 10% of treated sex offenders were rearrested for a new sex crime, compared with 17% of untreated offenders. Similarly, Losel and Schmucker (2005) concluded that sex offender treatment reduced recidivism by 40%. Though Marques et al. (2005) found no overall differences between treated and untreated sex offenders, they highlighted that sex offenders who successfully completed their treatment goals reoffended less frequently than those who did not "get it" (p. 97). Although more research is needed to ascertain the effect of treatment, there is evidence that therapeutic intervention can be helpful for many sex offenders.

Media attention to child abductions and sexually motivated murders spurs beliefs that children are at great risk from predators lurking in schoolyards and playgrounds. Indeed, Quinn et al. (2004) suggest that media and political rhetoric help to create and reinforce myths and stereotypes about sex offenders. Actually, 93% of child sexual abusers are well known to their victims (Berliner, Schram, Miller, & Milloy, 1995; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000); about

34% are family members and 59% are acquaintances (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Perpetrators have reported that their victims were rarely strangers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997). A Wisconsin study of about 200 cases revealed that recidivistic offenses in the sample included no predatory sex crimes against strangers (Zevitz, 2006). The myth of stranger danger may lead to a false sense of security for parents, whose children are actually at greatest risk of being abused by someone they know and trust (Berliner et al., 1995).

Public perceptions about sex offenders

Few studies have examined public perceptions about sexual abuse and sex offenders, but existing research suggests that many citizens are misinformed about the realities of sexual violence. In a survey of nearly 200 residents in Florida, a majority of subjects believed that 80% of sex offenders will reoffend, that many children are assaulted by strangers, and most were quite skeptical about the rehabilitative potential of sexual perpetrators (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). Females reported elevated levels of fear compared to males, and parents endorsed higher levels of anger and lower levels of tolerance for sex offenders living in communities. A more detailed analysis of these data, comparing public perceptions to published research, demonstrated statistically significant differences between public perceptions and documented rates of recidivism, stranger assault, and treatment effectiveness (Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, & Baker, 2007).

Public opinion surveys typically reveal strong support for community protection policies. In Washington, over 80% of those surveyed by telephone indicated that Megan's law was essential to guarantee public safety (Lieb & Nunlist, 2008; Phillips, 1998). The majority reported that they felt safer knowing where convicted sex offenders lived. Females were significantly more likely than males to be frightened or angry about a sex offender moving into the neighborhood. Those likely to have young children (30 to 40 year olds) expressed more concerns than those over 50 or under 30 (Phillips, 1998). Similarly, in a sample of 425 American adults who participated in a random digit dialing telephone survey, 92% supported publicly accessible sex offender information, 76% supported restrictions on where sex offenders can live, and over 90% believed that those convicted of sex crimes should be incarcerated (Mears, Mancini, Gertz, & Bratton, 2008). In a poll of 558 young adults in England, only 16% of participants believed that convicted child molesters could live safely in a community without posing a threat to children, and 69% did not believe that enough was being done to protect youngsters from sex offenders (News of the world, 2005).

When college students in Colorado were surveyed about their perceptions of child molesters, researchers found endorsements of stereotypical characteristics. (Fuselier, Durham, & Wurtele, 2002). For instance, students believed that a large percentage of child abusers are strangers, and that sex offenders tend to use force, aggression, or threats in the commission of a sex crime (Fuselier et al., 2002). The authors noted that the general public tends to embrace the belief that child molesters are social misfits, strangers, or "dirty old men" (p. 272).

Anderson and Sample (2008) studied awareness and utilization of community notification laws in a random sample of adult Nebraska residents. The researchers found that while most respondents were aware that a sex offender registry existed, few people accessed the site and those who did were unlikely to take precautionary measures as a result. Many respondents did

indicate that the registry led to increased feelings of safety. However, most people obtained information about registered sex offenders from an outlet other than the registry, such as a friend, family member, the newspaper, or the television (Anderson & Sample, 2008).

In interviews of 25 Midwestern politicians, the legislators reported that sex offenders were a “growing” problem (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). Most politicians characterized sex offenders as compulsive, persistent, and irredeemable. Though many described abusers as “sick,” none believed that rehabilitation was beneficial. Noteworthy is that when asked how they typically acquired knowledge about sex offenders, the politicians reported that the media was their primary source of information. Similarly, a survey of Florida legislators about crime policy revealed that 61% reflect on their own personal knowledge and media reports when contemplating sentencing and corrections policy initiatives (Cook & Lane, 2008). The majority of the Florida politicians (87%) reported that public views on a particular crime issue are a primary consideration when voting on such policies. Attention paid to crime in the media has shown an empirical association with knowledge of and support for sex crime policies, particularly Megan’s Law (Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002). As a result, the media appear to play a leading role in shaping public opinion and crime policies.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of a national sample of adults about sex offenders and sexual assault. It was hypothesized that the general public subscribes to many distorted beliefs about sex offenders, including myths of high recidivism rates, incurability, and stranger danger. It was also hypothesized that there would be differences between comparison groups (gender, age, parental status, and history of abuse) in the accuracy of their knowledge. This investigation was considered to be important because the promulgation and perpetuation of misinformation can lead to misguided interventions designed to address the very important problem of sexual violence. This study adds data from a national sample to the small body of literature regarding public perspectives about sex offenders.

METHOD

Participants

A sample of participants was recruited from 15 major metropolitan cities in the United States via www.craigslist.org, a nationwide Internet-based community message board. Craigslist is utilized by the public primarily to search for housing, employment, discussion forums, and volunteer opportunities. This is a neutral website holding no political view, and is accessed by individuals of various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds across a geographically diverse area.

The actual population for online sampling pools is unknown (Wright, 2005). Therefore we are unable to calculate the response rate and we are also limited in our ability to know if the sample is representative of the population. Out of the 257 people who initially responded to the survey announcement, missing data yielded only 127 completed and usable surveys. The survey instrument may have been too long, and evidently subjects dropped out as the survey went on. As well, some respondents were apparently reluctant to give demographic information, perhaps

fearing that they would somehow be identified (despite assurances of confidentiality) or that their user information would be stored for future unsolicited purposes.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

	Valid n	Valid %
Age	126	
<25	26	21%
25-64	99	77%
>65	1	1%
Sex	127	
Female	109	86%
Male	18	14%
Race/Ethnicity	126	
White	101	80%
Black	3	2%
Hispanic	8	6%
Other	14	11%
Education	127	
Some HS	1	1%
HS grad	7	6%
Some college	39	31%
AA degree	14	11%
Bachelors degree	43	34%
Graduate degree	23	18%
Religion	126	
Catholic	26	21%
Jewish	8	6%
Protestant	14	11%
None	50	40%
Other	28	22%
Household Income	126	
<20,000	18	14%
20-30,000	22	18%
30-40,000	23	18%
40-50,000	16	13%
>50,000	47	37%
Children	127	
None	83	65%
One or more	44	35%

Characteristics of the sample are displayed in Table 1. The sample was mostly white, female, and between the ages of 25-64. Slightly more than one-third reported that they had children. It was a well-educated group, with half holding a bachelors or graduate degree. Approximately half of the participants reported an income above \$40,000 per year. Though the most common religion was "none" (40%), a range of religious backgrounds was reported. The

high number of respondents reporting no religious affiliation is contrary to the findings of the American Religious Identification Survey, a random phone survey of over 50,000 Americans in which 81% reported some religious identity (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). The sample was geographically diverse, encompassing respondents from AZ, CA, CO, HI, IL, ME, NC, NV, NJ, NM, NY, PA, TN, TX, and WA.

Procedures

An advertisement titled “Perception of Sex Offenders Study” was placed in the “volunteers” section on Craigslist, a popular nationwide Internet-based community. Craigslist offers a menu that allows browsing individuals to select a state and city about which they would like to view information. The study was placed in the volunteers section of the states that were selected for the study (discussed below). Once viewers clicked on the advertisement, a short description of the study was presented with a link to the survey on www.surveymonkey.com, a reputable survey construction and data collection website.

Confidentiality and anonymity of all information was strictly protected. No identifying information was collected and all participants were assigned a random ID number by the website administrator. Survey Monkey uses Hypertext Transfer Protocol over Secure Socket Layer (HTTPS) to create encrypted communication, which is widely used on the World Wide Web for security-sensitive communications such as payment transactions and corporate logons. Informed consent for participation appeared on the entry page of the survey. The survey was not launched unless the consent form was checked “I agree.” This study was carried out according to the federal guidelines for the ethical treatment of human research participants and was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

Efforts were made to represent diverse geographic regions of the United States (i.e. South, East coast, West coast, Midwest, and Northeast). The state capital or the largest and most populated city that was available on Craigslist was selected for posting the survey. Such cities were selected in order to increase sample size for that state. For example, if Houston, Texas was not available, the researchers chose Austin, Texas. The survey was posted for seven days in one city in each selected state and after one week the survey was moved to a different state. Data collection began in Fall 2006 and was completed by Spring 2007. The valid sample consisted of 127 community members from 15 different states.

The strengths and limitations of online survey methods are recognized by researchers (Pokela, Denny, Steblea, & Melanson, 2008; Wright, 2005). Online surveys allow data to be collected relatively quickly from large numbers of subjects without the financial costs associated with interviewing and data entry. On the other hand, not all adults access the World Wide Web, and so Internet users may not accurately represent the general population; they are more likely to be white, more educated, more affluent, and younger (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). Moreover, there is no systematic method (e.g. similar to random digit dialing for telephone surveys) for random sampling when surveying people online (Pokela et al., 2008), and self-selection can potentially lead to sample bias (Wright, 2005). These limitations notwithstanding, an online survey was deemed to be an efficient method for collecting data from a large pool of citizens.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete a survey made up of three domains. First, demographic information was collected, including age, gender, ethnicity, number of children, occupation, and household income. The next domain asked participants to answer questions about sexual offenders and sexual violence. Questions from two surveys developed by the Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM, operated under a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice), were combined to create this domain containing 24 questions. Questions were taken from the *CSOM Facts About Sex Offending Behavior Survey*, a true/false quiz used by several organizations to educate both laypersons and professionals about sex offenders (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2000a), and the *CSOM Myths and Facts Survey*, a true/false format used to educate citizens, policymakers, and clinicians about sexual assault myths, misconceptions and facts (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2000b). The 24 questions (listed in Table 3) asked about specific issues related to perceptions of sexual offenders and sexual assault, and were not intended to create a measure or scale of knowledge about the subject. Rather, each question stands alone with regard to analysis. Therefore, no psychometric scale analyses were conducted (e.g. Chronbach's alpha). The third domain involved a *Life Experiences Questionnaire* (Wnuk, 2006) in which participants were asked to respond "yes/no" to questions regarding past experience with victimization or victimizing others. This questionnaire was developed for a study exploring attitudes toward sex offender treatment, and questions were derived from relevant research exploring past history of victimization (Wnuk, 2006) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Life Experiences Questionnaire

Item	no		yes	
	n	%	n	%
Have you ever been a victim of an attempted violent crime?	49	52%	45	48%
Have you been the victim of a violent crime?	64	68%	30	32%
Have you ever been a victim of an attempted sex crime?	50	54%	43	46%
Have you been the victim of a sex crime?	50	53%	44	47%
As a child/adolescent, have were you a victim of sexual abuse?	58	62%	35	38%
As a child/adolescent, have you ever been molested?	56	60%	37	40%
Since your teenage years, have you ever been a victim of a sex crime?	72	77%	21	23%

Table 2: Life Experiences Questionnaire

Item	no		yes	
	n	%	n	%
Have you ever been a victim of exhibitionism (i.e. been 'flashed,' or had someone expose themselves to you)?	45	48%	49	52%
Have you ever been a victim of voyeurism (i.e. had been watched at home by a 'peeping Tom')?	68	75%	23	25%
Have you ever been a victim of frotteurism (i.e. been rubbed against in public)?	53	58%	39	42%
Has anyone in your immediate family been the victim of a violent crime?	61	66%	31	34%
Has anyone in your immediate family been the victim of a sex crime?	56	61%	36	39%
Do you have friends that have been the victims of violent crimes?	43	47%	49	53%
Do you have friends that have been victims of a sex crime?	29	32%	63	68%
Have you ever been arrested?	71	76%	23	24%
If you have been arrested, have you been convicted of a crime?	51	78%	14	22%
If you have been convicted, have you ever been placed on probation or been incarcerated?	47	82%	10	18%
Has anyone in your family ever been arrested?	48	52%	45	48%
If an immediate family member has been arrested, was s/he convicted of a crime?	47	64%	27	36%
If an immediate family member has been convicted, was s/he placed on probation or been incarcerated?	45	65%	24	35%
Do you have friends who have been arrested?	34	37%	58	63%

Table 2: Life Experiences Questionnaire

Item	no		yes	
	n	%	n	%
If a friend has been arrested, was s/he convicted of a crime?	40	48%	43	52%
If a friend has been convicted, was s/he placed on probation or been incarcerated?	38	51%	37	49%
Do you know anyone who has committed a sexual offense against another person?	58	63%	34	37%
Do you know any convicted sex offenders?	67	71%	27	29%
Does your neighborhood have a high crime rate?	68	76%	21	24%
If so, does your neighborhood have a high rate of assaults?	55	79%	15	21%
Does your neighborhood have a high rate of sexual assaults?	71	91%	7	9%

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated to obtain the characteristics of the sample as well as the proportion of respondents answering *true* or *false* to the survey questions. To compare differences between groups, t-tests and chi-squares were utilized. Data analysis was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 15 (SPSS, 2007).

RESULTS

Participants were asked to identify the sources by which they received information about sexual assault and sex offenders. Most participants received their information from the popular media, including television (43%), newspapers (29%), magazines (10%), and radio (9%). The Internet was also a common source of information (38%). Participants also identified family (7%), friends (10%), and school (9%) as information resources.

Participants were then asked to endorse the CSOM items as either true or false. Results are listed in Table 3, along with the correct answer as identified by CSOM. There were many items about which participants seemed to be fairly well informed. However, three questions stood out as overwhelmingly but erroneously endorsed as true, such as the perception that most sex offenders reoffend (98%), that juvenile sex offenders were typically abused as children and grow up to be adult offenders (84%), and that sex offender treatment is ineffective (66%). Other items were a close call, with a majority of participants answering correctly, but a substantial minority who were misinformed. For example, it is false that most children who are sexually

abused will grow up to be abusers, but 39% believed this to be true. About a third did not believe that most sexual assaults are committed by someone of the same race as the victim. Nearly half opined that the cost of treatment and managing sex offenders in the community is too high, despite data that incarceration is much less cost-effective. Though the majority agreed that only a small percentage of child sex abusers use force, nearly half of respondents endorsed this item as false. A large minority (43%) believed that sex offenders find victims by frequenting schoolyards and playgrounds, and more than a third rejected the notion that children rarely make up stories of abuse.

Table 3: CSOM Myths

	True		False		Correct Answer
	N	%	N	%	
1. Most sexual assaults are committed by strangers.	4	3%	123	97%	False
2. The majority of sexual offenders are caught, convicted, and in prison.	1	1%	126	99%	False
3. Most sex offenders re-offend.	124	98%	3	2%	False
4. Children who are sexually assaulted will sexually assault others when they grow up.	50	39%	77	61%	False
5. Juvenile sex offenders typically are victims of child sexual abuse and grow up to be adult sex offenders.	106	84%	20	16%	False
6. Treatment for sex offenders is ineffective.	84	66%	43	34%	False
7. The cost of treating and managing sex offenders in the community is too high.	54	43%	73	57%	False
8. Most sex offenders do not know their victim.	5	4%	122	96%	False
9. Most sexual assaults are committed by someone of the same race as the victim.	88	69%	39	31%	True
10. Only a small percentage of child sexual abusers use physical force or threat to gain compliance from their victims.	71	56%	56	44%	True

Table 3: CSOM Myths

	True		False		Correct Answer
	N	%	N	%	
11. Most child sexual abusers find their victims by frequenting such places as schoolyards and playgrounds.	55	43%	72	57%	False
12. Only men commit sexual assault.	1	1%	126	99%	False
13. Child sexual abusers are only attracted to children and are not capable of appropriate sexual relationships.	17	13%	110	87%	False
14. Children rarely make up stories of abuse.	81	64%	45	36%	True
15. Victims of sexual assault are harmed only through physical violence.	1	1%	125	99%	False
16. If a child does not tell anyone about the abuse, it is because he or she must have been a willing participant.	0	0%	126	100%	False
17. It is common for both child and adult victims of sexual assault to wait some time before telling someone about the abuse.	118	94%	8	6%	True
18. If someone sexually assaults an adult, he will not target children as victims, and if someone sexually assaults a child, he will not target adults.	18	14%	108	86%	False
19. It helps the victim to talk about the abuse when they are ready to do so.	121	96%	5	4%	True
20. Sexual gratification is often not a primary motivation for a rape offender.	117	92%	10	8%	True
21. Men who rape do so because they cannot find a consenting sexual partner.	3	2%	124	98%	False
22. Drugs and alcohol cause sexual offenses to occur.	49	39%	77	61%	False

Table 3: CSOM Myths

	True		False		Correct Answer
	N	%	N	%	
23. Victims of sexual assault often share some blame for the assault.	41	32%	86	68%	False
24. If a victim does not say 'no,' or does not fight back, it is not considered sexual assault.	11	9%	116	91%	False

Table 4: Differences in mean Total CSOM score between groups

	Groups	N	Mean	SD	t
Gender	male	18	17	2.8	-1.279
	female	109	18	2.1	
		N	Mean	SD	t
Victim of a sex crime	No	50	17.9	2.3	-.574
	Yes	44	18.2	2.1	
		N	Mean	SD	t
Parent	No	83	17.8	2.4	-.706
	Yes	44	17.5	2.2	
		N	Mean	SD	t
Age	Under 25	26	18.3	1.8	1.478
	25-65	100	17.6	2.3	

The CSOM questionnaire was comprised of 24 true/false questions. Upon completion of the study, the answers were recoded into “correct” and “incorrect.” The *count* function in SPSS was used to tally the number of correct responses, generating a total CSOM score of correct

answers for each participant. Potentially, respondents could have scored between a “0” with no correct responses and “24” if they responded correctly to every item. Their scores ranged from a low of “12” to a high of “24” with a mean of 17.74 (median = 18, mode = 17, SD = 2.26).

Table 4 compares the mean differences between groups on their total CSOM scores, to see which groups endorsed more items correctly. Specifically, the comparisons were based on gender, sex crime victimization experience, parenthood status, and age (under 25 vs. 25 or older). There were no significant differences between males and females, between victims and non-victims, between parents and non-parents, or between younger and older adults.

Next, Chi Square analysis was utilized to assess each CSOM item to examine differences within the four comparison groups. Overall, the groups answered each question in a similar fashion. Some significant differences were noted and are displayed in Table 5. The greatest variation in responses was found for gender and being the victim of a sex crime. With regard to gender, significant differences were found on three questions, and women were more likely to answer correctly. For instance, when asked if children rarely make up stories of abuse, 70% of women answered correctly compared to 28% of men. Similarly, when asked whether children who are sexually abused will sexually assault others when they grow up, 65% of women answered correctly, whereas only 33% of men did.

In two out of three instances in which significant differences were found, victims of sex crimes answered correctly more often than non-victims. When asked whether abused children will sexually assault others when they grow up, 75% of victims and 52% of non-victims answered correctly. On a similar note, when asked whether juvenile sex offenders who were victims of child sexual abuse grow up to become adult sex offenders, 23% of victims answered correctly, compared to only 6% of non-victims. When asked whether victims of sexual assault share some blame for the abuse, however, 80% of non-victims answered correctly, whereas only 55% of victims did so.

Age was significant for two items. When asked whether children who are sexually assaulted will sexually assault others when they grow up, respondents under age 25 answered correctly 81% of time, compared to 56% of individuals between 25 and 65. When asked about sexual gratification as the primary motivation for rape, 95% of respondents age 25-65 answered correctly. Over 80% of individuals under age 25 answered this item correctly as well, but this was a significant difference ($p = .017$). Table 5 provides results of all significant chi square analyses.

Table 5: Chi Square analyses of individual CSOM items

Question	Independent Variable	% Correct	χ^2	Sig.	
Children who are sexually assaulted will sexually assault others when they grow up.	Age	Under 25	80.8%	5.327	.021
		25-65	56.0%		
	Gender	Male	33.3%		
Female		65.1%			
Victim of a sex crime?	Yes	Yes	75%	5.298	.021
		No	52%		
If someone sexually assaults an adult, he will not target children as victims.	Parent	Yes	76.7%	4.289	.038
		No	90.4%		
Juvenile sex offenders typically are victims of child sexual abuse and grow up to be adult sex offenders.	Victim of a sex crime?	Yes	22.7%	5.495	.019
		No	6.0%		
Victims of sexual assault often share some blame for the assault.	Victim of a sex crime?	Yes	54.5%	6.979	.008
		No	80.0%		
Most sex offenders do not know their victim.	Gender	Male	83.3%	8.986	.003
		Female	98.2%		
Children rarely make up stories of abuse.	Gender	Male	27.8%	12.191	.001
		Female	70.4%		
Sexual gratification is often not a primary motivation for a rape offender.	Age	Under 25	80.8%	5.719	.017
		25-65	95.0%		

DISCUSSION

Overall, participants were fairly well-informed about some sexual violence facts on the CSOM questionnaire while other items stood out as common areas of misconception. It is noteworthy that the average CSOM score was 17.7. If converted to a percentage or letter grade as most tests or exams are, the average grade would be a 73% or a “C”. The majority of the sample received their information about sex offenders via television. In retrospect, we should have required participants to endorse only the source by which they were *most likely* to gain information, but they were asked to check all that applied, limiting our ability to rank the most common sources of information. Similarly, it is unclear whether participants who endorsed “Internet” as their primary source of knowledge about sex offenders were referring to informational websites, Internet news sites, or sex offender registries.

The findings suggest that community members are misguided in certain beliefs about sexual violence. More specifically, respondents believe that most sex offenders reoffend, that treatment for sex offenders is ineffective, and that juvenile sex offenders typically are victims of child sexual abuse and grow up to be adult sexual offenders. Research suggests, however, that among the criminal population sexual offenders are among the least likely to recidivate (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003;2006). About 30% adult sex offenders themselves have been sexually victimized (Hanson & Slater, 1988), and while past sexual abuse may increase the likelihood of sexually aggressive behavior, most children who are sexually abused never go on to abuse others (CSOM, 2000b). A substantial minority of participants believed that sex offenders prey on children in schoolyards and playgrounds, despite that most child victims are abused by trusted adults (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). This popular notion can potentially interfere with parents' ability to protect their children by reinforcing fear of strangers and inhibiting awareness of common ways that sex offenders gain access to child victims through familiarity and dependence on caretakers.

There were some interesting differences between groups. Males were more likely to falsely believe that child victims will sexually assault others when they grow up and that children fabricate accusations of abuse. Actually, the literature indicates that children are more likely to withhold true information regarding victimization than to make up stories (CSOM, 2000a). Perhaps because females are statistically more likely to be sexually abused in childhood, they were more likely to accurately endorse beliefs about victimization. As well, the small number of males in this study may have impacted the results. Those who reported being the victim of a sex crime answered correctly more often than non-victims about the likelihood of child victims growing up to be abusers. Those who were sexually assaulted may understand, from their own experience, that victimization is not a direct line to abusive behavior, while non-victims may consider abuse history to be a parsimonious explanation for violent conduct. Interestingly, those who did report a history of sexual victimization tended to endorse that "victims of sexual assault often share some blame for the assault." The reality is that victims of sexual assault are never to blame, but "children are often made to feel like willing participants that contributes to their shame and guilt" (CSOM, 2000a, p.7). The correct answer to this question was rated as "true" by CSOM. Perhaps a better wording would have been "victims of sexual assault often *feel as though they* share some blame for the assault." The question as asked implies that victims are somehow responsible in part for their own assault, and we want to emphasize that victims do not invite abuse, nor are they at fault. In any case, it is important to note the persistence of common and dangerous myths that some victims contribute to their own abuse and other victims should not be believed.

These findings have important implications not only for victim advocacy but also for the reintegration of sex offenders into mainstream society. The misconception that most sexual offenders reoffend and that treatment for sexual offenders is ineffective is embedded in the very core of sex offender registration, notification, and housing restriction policies. Even more striking is that there is little empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of such policies (Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). Levenson et al. (2007), examining public perceptions of sex offender legislation, reported that 74% of community members surveyed endorsed the statement "I would support these policies even if there is no scientific evidence showing that they reduce

sexual assault.” As well, many in the current study believed that the cost of treating and managing sex offenders in the community is too high. Research has shown that rehabilitation is a cost-effective means of sex offender management and crime reduction (McGrath, Cumming, & Burchard, 2003).

It is not completely clear where public misperceptions originate, but we suspect that the media play a large role in sustaining myths by portraying sexual offenders as a homogenous group of criminals who are incurable and highly predatory. It would be advantageous for future research to investigate where information about sex offenders is generated and how such myths are formed. As well, journalists should be encouraged to recognize that media reports of sensational cases may skew public perceptions, and to balance the reporting of sex crime news with more informative investigative journalism.

A link has been noted between exposure to media reports about sex crimes and an individual's awareness of sexual violence and support of community protection policies (Proctor et al., 2002). Reprehensible sex crimes incite vast media coverage, and the frequency of such news accounts has increased substantially over the years. Sample and Kadleck (2006) found that 3633 articles about sex offenders appeared in three major Midwestern newspapers between 1991 and 1998 and that news coverage of sex crimes increased 128% during that time period. By comparison, a Google News search using the keyword “sex offender” conducted by the current authors on January 27, 2008 for news articles in the preceding 30 days yielded 4450 hits. Themes of high recidivism rates are consistently apparent throughout news articles, along with portrayals of sex offenders as inevitable recidivists despite punishment and rehabilitation (Sample & Kadleck, 2006). Sample and Kadleck concluded that the “increase in news accounts of sexually motivated homicide could well support public perceptions that sex offending is often synonymous with murder” (p. 20) and that the media can “affect public perception regarding the prevalence of sex crimes by over-reporting single incidents” (p. 8). The terms “sex offender,” “predator” and “pedophile” are often used interchangeably and Americans have a poor understanding of the heterogeneity of sex offenders and registry-eligible crimes (Quinn et al., 2004). The media focus on child abduction and pedophilia neglects that most sexual murder victims are adult females and that rapists of women also pose a danger to our community.

There were several limitations to the current study. The sample was small and comprised of non-randomized, self-selected participants, mostly women, recruited from the Internet, which impacts the generalizability of our findings. It may be that females were more apt to respond to our postings considering that a significantly large proportion of sexual assault victims are women. Another explanation is that women may be more likely to “volunteer” or at least search “volunteer” opportunities on the web than men. It is also important to note that despite efforts to represent each geographical region equally by posting the survey in major metropolitan cities, the results yielded a small number of respondents in each state. Similarly, those living in rural areas may have been excluded. Perceptions about sex offenders have been found to differ based on residential location (Anderson & Sample, 2008). Future research should further explore regional, urban, and rural differences in responses, and different sampling techniques might ensure a more diverse sample. In order to participate in this study, all subjects had to have access to a computer and the Internet. While this method was cost-effective and time-efficient, those who have a computer and Internet access are likely to be different from those who do not.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of the collective views about sexual assault in American society. It is imperative that the public be educated about facts surrounding sexual violence, victimization, and sex offending behaviors. By utilizing scientific data to inform practices, we can promote victim advocacy and policy implementation that is grounded by empirical evidence rather than by myths and misconceptions. Erroneous beliefs propel and sustain the ever-popular policies that hinder successful offender reintegration, limit resources for victim services, and detract from more effective strategies to reduce sex crimes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Data were collected for completion of a master's thesis at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Stacey Katz-Schiavone would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Jeglic, thesis chair, for her advisement, support, and patience.

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