IMPACT OF PERCEPTIONS ON SO REGISTRATION

Perceptions of News Media Effects on Sex Offender Reintegration

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Sex offenders are expected to reintegrate back into society following a period of supervision and quite possibly incarceration. Studies have shown that social supports, housing, and employment are important factors for both successful reintegration and likelihood to desist from sexual offending. Many of the challenges to successful reintegration are associated with the negative perceptions of the public, family members, and employers. The media plays a critical role in markedly influencing societal views and opinions about sex offenders. Little research has examined the influence that the media (e.g., newspapers, television news programs, fictional portrayals of sex offenders) have had on sex offenders. This presentation examines the perceived impact that the media has had on sex offender reintegration and discusses the responsibility of treatment providers, policy makers, and other stakeholders for improving the likelihood of successful community reintegration of sex offenders.

In this study, 167 participants that include sex offenders, professionals who work with sex offenders, and university students were surveyed regarding their perceptions of how the media portrays sex offenders and the effects these portrayals have on sex offender reintegration. More importantly, specific areas where media might affect reintegration were examined.

The results indicated that a majority of participants reported that the media portrays sex offenders negatively, viewed the media as an accurate source of information, and saw that the media is impactful on people’s opinions of sex offenders. Although there were no differences among the three groups of participants on these variables, there were some differences in the impact that media had on specific areas of reintegration. More than half of the sample acknowledged that the media had a negative impact on sex offenders finding work, finding a place to live, making positive relationships, achieving financial stability, and reducing feelings of isolation. Some notable differences were evident among the groups. Both sex offenders and professionals in the field of supervising or treating sexual offending behaviour, viewed employment problems and access to supports as less of a problem created by the media than students. Moreover, sex offenders deemed physical and verbal threats to be less of a problem than the non-sex offender groups. Sex offenders seemed to view the media’s negative attention leading to more undeserved consequences for sex offenders, decreased motivation to stop offending, and reduced support by others. Interestingly, these areas have been identified in other research to be useful dynamic predictors of sexual recidivism (i.e., hostility, collapse of social supports). Addressing these needs and responsivity issues in treatment can ameliorate the impact of negative media attention drawn to sexual offenders. Approaches to address these areas identified in
our research would contribute to an improved well-being of offenders and, in turn, may lead to increased likelihood of success in their reintegration.

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New Neighbors: Promoting Cautious Compassion towards Sex Offenders

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Summary
The goals of successful offender reintegration often seem to be at odds with each other. On the one hand, research suggests that successful reintegration is heavily dependent on the offender’s ability to form bonds with their community, while on the other hand there is a clear need to protect society from individuals who may be dangerous. This study examined how and why people form the attitudes they have towards offenders and what methods might be most effective in changing the reactions of individuals in the community. Preliminary results suggest that attitudes and feelings towards offenders are highly ingrained, but education regarding an offender’s personal struggles, the type of treatment and supervision they are under, and general facts about sex offending can be effective methods for modifying emotional and cognitive reactions.

Aims
Sex Offender registration and notification is now a well-known aspect of the criminal justice system. However, research supporting the effectiveness of these provisions for reducing recidivism has been called into question (Prescott & Rockoff, 2008). Additionally, there is a threat that these kinds of notifications increase stigma and prejudice against sex offenders, and therefore may actually increase the chances that an offender will recidivate (Tewksbury, 2005; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007). The goal of this study was to integrate research from the field of stereotyping and prejudice to understand how and why people develop the views they have of offenders, and how best to intervene and achieve an optimal balance between the need for caution and compassion.

Method
400 undergraduate students attending college at a major university in the Southwest were surveyed. Participants were presented with real-world sex offender notifications (randomized to both child molesters and rapists, in addition to control conditions) and were then randomized to be presented with interventions designed to provide “personal” information about the offender, information regarding treatment and supervision, and facts regarding sex offender recidivism, as well as a control condition. Data was then collected concerning the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions of the participants.
Results
Preliminary analyses appear to indicate that participants have highly engrained attitudes and emotional reactions towards offenders (particularly anger and disgust). However, the different interventions showed some success in modifying patterns of reactions in specific ways. In particular, some interventions were good at changing beliefs about myths that surround offenders, while others were effective at increasing compassion, and decreasing disgust.

Conclusions-Significance
This study suggests that attitudes towards sex offenders can be addressed utilizing simple informational interventions which could easily be included in the notification process. If such methods can be strengthened and widely implemented it may be possible to change sex offender notifications from a practice of questionable utility into an opportunity to educate the community and create a safer and more supportive environment for the reintegration of sex offenders.