

## **Attitudes Towards Sexual Offenders Returning to Live in the Community**

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### **Abstract**

Sexual offenders that can access a positive support network within their lives, have extremely lower levels of recidivism compared to those who do not receive support, or if negative support is given (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004). If an offender begins to feel isolated, hopeless or fearful then this might prohibit reintegration and trigger a relapse (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). This study investigated attitudes towards sexual offenders returning to live in the community. The specific aims of the study were to explore attitude differences using three variables; perpetrator gender, participant gender and parental status of participant. In total 643 participants (166 males, 477 females) were recruited. They completed one of two questionnaires based upon a fictional scenario featuring either a male or a female perpetrator of a sexual offence returning to live in the community. The findings of this study demonstrated that there were no significant differences in attitudes based upon the gender of the perpetrator. However, female participants were found to hold stronger punitive views compared to men; and parents were found to hold stronger punitive views compared to non-parents. Future research could build upon the current study to explore these differences. The findings obtained from this study have the potential to be used with professionals working with sexual offenders, to help the individual understand and prepare for reactions from the public when returning to society.

*Keywords: sexual offending, attitudes, parent, participant gender, offending*

Sexual offenders, and sexual crimes in general, can incite high levels of concern amongst the general public (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). This has resulted in lawmakers creating a range of social policies aimed at protecting members of the community from sexual victimisation; including sex offender registries (e.g. LaFond, 2005; Lees & Tewksbury, 2006; Petrunik, 2003). Sex offences that occur within the UK are crimes covered under the Sexual Offences Act (2003). This act covers two different aspects, with the first part covering different sexual offences and the second part covering offenders, as well as a greater emphasis on protecting the most vulnerable in society. Convicted sexual offenders have to adhere to and comply with a set of conditions including; reporting to their local police force each year, informing police if there have been any changes to their name and address, disclosing if they are going to be absent from home for more than seven days, and supplying their national insurance number (CPS, 2013). Several repeated requests by community action groups, by the general public as well as by the media have been made to grant access of the sex offenders register in the UK to the general public (Lipscombe, 2012).

Research has suggested that there is not enough evidence to support the argument that notifying the public would increase the safety of specific groups such as children (Lovell, 2001). Zevitz and Farkas (2000) suggested there were some advantages of notifying the public of sexual offenders living within the area, providing an educational approach was used. Nevertheless, they also suggest that at the centre of notifying the community, there is the dilemma of allowing the public to have their right to be aware, as well as the offender being able to reintegrate back into society. Furthermore, they also did not find evidence to support the idea of holding meetings to notify the public would reduce anxiety levels of attendees; the opposite seemed to have occurred with 67% of respondents reporting to have an increased sense of concern after the meeting, compared to before (Zevits & Farkas, 2000). Kernsmith, Craun, and Foster (2009) surveyed members of the Michigan community and asked about their fear of the concept of sexual offenders living within society, with the offender type varying (incest, marital rape, child sexual offences, historical offences). Offenders of incest, as well as paedophiles, appeared to be more feared than other offenders, with statutory rapists seeming to be the least feared. Although this study was conducted within the USA, other studies suggest that the views of the UK and USA public are similar and that attitudes towards sexual offenders appear to have become worse since the nineties (Gakhal, & Brown, 2011).

### **Reintegration of Sexual Offenders**

A potential barrier of sexual offenders reintegrating could be the resistant attitude from the community which could be detrimental, not just to the individual who is trying to reintegrate, but the community as well. Willis and Grace (2009) have drawn attention to the notion of lack of social support being a strong predictor of a sexual offender's probable recidivism and this argument is further strengthened by Braithwaite (1989), who proposes that an offender is more likely to reoffend if they are unable to reintegrate back into society. In addition to this, research by Edwards and Hensley (2001) states that if an offender starts to feel isolated, hopeless or fearful then this might prohibit reintegration and may trigger a relapse. Altogether, this research implies that in order to avoid sexual offenders relapsing, their integration into society needs to be investigated.

Research has shown that sexual offenders who were able to access a positive support network within their lives had lower levels of recidivism and less violations of rules compared to those who did not receive support, or if the public reaction was negative (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004). Support for this argument can be evidenced more recently by research conducted by Circles South East, (2012). A Circle is a service where volunteers meet with an individual who has committed a sexual offence; with the aim of reducing recidivism by offering general social support through regular meetings that include discussing progress in that individual's life. Data was examined regarding 71 core members (sexual offenders who engaged in the support scheme) since November 2002, which was then compared to data based upon 71 sexual offenders who were not eligible to be part of a Circle. The findings reported that none of the core members, since taking part in their Circle, had been involved with committing a new sexual or violent offence. Interestingly however, ten of the individuals who did not participate in the Circles scheme had been involved in committing further sexual related or violent offences.

To further argue the benefits of community group support Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo, (2005) compared data based upon the recidivism of 60 sexual offenders who had been involved in support from a Circle of Support and 60 that had not. For the purpose of the study, Wilson et al. (2005) defined recidivism as any of the following: when a sexual offender had been arrested in relation to a sexual offence, had breached a court order or had been convicted of committing a new sexual offence. The findings suggested that sexual offenders who had been part of a Circle had a 70% reduced rate of sexual recidivism with a continuous follow-up period of approximately 4.5 years. This can be argued to be a positive

finding to support the use of schemes such as Circles and their effectiveness in helping support sexual offenders returning to the community. This finding is particularly relevant to the current study in that it shows a considerable time period of significantly reduced rates of recidivism whilst an offender is reintegrating back into society.

Policies, including residence restrictions, have the potential to damage the stability of sexual offenders and negatively interact with the chances of developing social bonds, obtaining employment, as well as engaging in positively structured activities; which raises concerns that they might be counterproductive (Levenson, 2006). Some sexual offenders have reported to have experienced higher levels of fear that their sexual offences would be exposed once they had returned to society (McAlinden, & Hudson, 2006). Fear can arise for some sexual offenders with regards to the community response of discovering that a sexual offender is living within the area; which could raise difficulties in maintaining their supervision if the community attempts to circulate knowledge about where the sexual offender lives (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). These fears may not just affect their attitudes and behaviour, but may also negatively impact on future interactions with others (Brogden & Harkin, 2000). More recently, research has found that some sexual offenders, who were due for release from prison, reported that being kept in prison would be a less terrifying solution (Mills & Grimshaw, 2012). This is both a significant and concerning issue because if some sexual offenders are fearful of returning to society, and would rather stay in prison, then this could increase chances of recidivism post release.

### **Gender**

Current research on the influence of gender on attitudes towards sexual offenders appears to be varied. Most of the current research appears to show no differences in attitudes between male and female participants (e.g. Brown, 1999; Hogue & Peebles, 1997; Rogers, Hirst, & Davies, 2011). To explain further, research by Hogue and Peebles (1997) found there were no attitude differences towards sexual offenders between male and female professionals who worked with sexual offenders and victims of sexually related crimes. However, some more recent research has identified some differences in attitudes between male and female participants. Ferguson and Ireland (2006) found that females held less punitive views towards sexual offenders compared to males; and this viewpoint was shared across several types of sexual offending. Nevertheless, Craig (2005) explored attitudes towards sexual offenders within 85 probation staff and residential hostel workers. The findings highlighted that female

staff were more worried about issues regarding their personal safety, which led them to express more negative attitudes towards sexual offenders, in comparison to their male colleagues. Furthermore, Chui, Cheng and Wong (2012) gathered information on 170 university students in Hong Kong who were majoring in social work. Their findings also found that female students were significantly more fearful of becoming a victim of a sexual crime compared to male students. In general, current findings suggest mixed views of attitudes towards sexual offenders depending on gender of participant.

Female perpetrated sexual offending has usually been summarised as being generally uncommon when compared to that of male perpetrated sexual offending (Gannon & Rose, 2008; O'Connar, 1987; Peter, 2009). However, abuse committed by female perpetrators seems to have attracted higher levels of recognition more recently from the media, the Criminal Justice System, and from forensic professionals (Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2009; Gannon & Rose, 2008). Research focusing on rates of recidivism of female sexual offenders has begun to attract more attention, after many years of neglect. Cortoni and Hanson's (2005) research suggested that the rate of recidivism of sexual offences committed by females are typically lower when compared to male sexual offenders. However, the total number of female offenders included in this review can be considered to be small (380 females, compared to 5935 males); however, this may be a reflection of the number of female sexual offenders in general (Cortoni et al., 2010). A point to consider is that generally, women's criminal involvement is low (Blanchette & Brown, 2006), and even more so evident in relation to female sexual offenders (Giguere & Bumby, 2007). Recent research implies that the ratio of male to female sexual offenders is roughly 20:1 and that females make up approximately 5% of the total number of sexual offences (Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2010). The study conducted by Cortoni et al. (2010), investigated adult female sexual offenders in the Netherlands and found that they are responsible for less than 1% of the total number of all sexual offending cases involving physical contact.

Various barriers exist with attempting to report female sexual offenders, including the common perception that female perpetrated sexual abuse is not taken as seriously, when compared to the sexual abuse perpetrated by males (Denov, 2003). These barriers could be affecting crime statistics, in that fewer female perpetrated offences are reported possibly because victims believe they would not be taken seriously. Not only that but there is a taboo regarding sexual offences committed by females, and conventional sexual scripts exist that depict females as innocent and sexually passive (Oliver, 2007). Still, this does not support

research that has found female perpetrators of counter-stereotype offences (e.g. murder, especially of children) have been portrayed as being worse than male perpetrators (Viki, Massey, & Masser, 2005), with such females being depicted as displaying 'double deviance' (Heidensohn, 1987, p. 20). This term is in reference to females who are not only believed to be deviant for breaking social rules but who have also violated their traditional gender roles. Research by Bexson (2011) supports this idea of double deviance further in that their findings of well-known cases involving sexual abuse by female perpetrators (Myra Hindley from 1960's, Rosemary West from 1990's and Vanessa George from 2009) highlight that even though male perpetrators were involved, the media, as well as the public, focused their attention and hostility towards the female perpetrator. These findings highlight some of the attitudes held towards the gender of sexual perpetrated offences. Not only that sexual offences are portrayed as extremely negative, but within the media especially, female perpetrators seem to be portrayed extremely negatively in comparison to males.

### **Parental Status**

With regards to parental status, a study surveyed 250 residents of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who had some experience of being notified of sex offenders in the area; it was found that females and parents of young children had a greater likelihood than males and non-parents to believe that notification of sexual offenders within the community was important (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004). To strengthen this argument further, research by Morton, (n.d) found that 60% of parents strongly supported the notion of the neighbourhood being notified compared to only 20% of non-parents. However, 88% of non-parents within this sample did still either strongly agree or agree to the community being notified which implies there is not a difference in levels of support between parents and non-parents. Some research has found that parents have higher chances of supporting stronger measures in targeting sexual offenders, including an AMBER Alert system in America where a broadcast is issued once a child goes missing (Zgoba, 2004). AMBER alerts are distributed via radio stations (including Internet radio), television stations. These alerts have also been integrated with map features on Google Maps. However, Palkovitz (1998) argues that being a parent can lead to a better understanding that people are imperfect, meaning they would support less punitive methods. Other studies have been unable to find a relationship between parental status and sexual offender awareness (e.g. Craun, 2010, Levenson, Brannon, Fortney & Baker, 2007). Therefore, it can be argued that further research that takes into account parental status and

attitudes towards sexual offenders needs to be conducted to further explore the attitudes of the general public when looking at parental status.

### **The Current Study**

The aim of this study was to gain an insight into the general public's attitudes towards sexual offenders returning to live in the community. This study hoped to build upon current research already available by further exploring attitude differences towards sexual offenders returning to the community in more detail by investigating three variables: gender of participant, gender of perpetrator, and parental status of participant. It is important that these variables are explored as they could highlight issues within society today (e.g. assumption that either male or female perpetrators are less capable than the other); that impact both the general public, and also sexual offenders returning to society. Capturing an up-to-date view from society today is important when it comes to policy makers' decisions, as this has the ability to affect society as a whole. Based upon the literature presented earlier, three hypotheses were developed and be tested. They are as follows:

(H1) Male participants and female participants will have different levels of punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders living back in the community.

(H2) Participants will have more punitive attitudes towards the female sexual offender, than towards the male sexual offender

(H3) Parents will have stronger punitive views towards sexual offenders living back in the community compared to non-parents

## **Method**

### **Design**

A three-way between subjects design was utilised. Participants randomly selected which vignette they were allocated; a vignette about either a male perpetrator or a female perpetrator. The three independent variables were the gender of perpetrator (male and female), gender of participant (male and female) and parental status (parent or non-parent. Differences in attitudes towards sexual offenders living in the community were then

measured as the dependent variable. The dependent variable was measured by totalling participants' attitude scores from the questionnaire.

### **Participants and Procedure**

The final sample consisted of 643 participants with ages ranging from 18 to 75 ( $M = 33.50$ ). There were 166 male and 477 female participants, and there were 283 parents and 360 non-parents. For the vignette, 449 of participants had randomly selected to read the female perpetrator vignette and 194 of participants had randomly selected the male perpetrator vignette. The participants were recruited using self-selecting sampling by the questionnaire link being posted on different message boards, social media pages and groups as well as the link being issued via e-mail to a Circles of Support and Accountability scheme in Cumbria. Once recruited, the participants took part in the questionnaire through Bristol Online Survey, which included information about the study, a space for them to give informed consent, and debriefing information. Vignettes (either about a male or a female sexual offender) were allocated by the participant choosing a picture of either a square or a circle; this was to reduce participant bias.

### **Materials**

The questionnaire used to collect data was first pilot tested by ten participants who were opportunistically sampled. Five male vignettes and five female vignettes were randomly allocated on paper to the ten participants. Positive feedback was received so the questionnaire was not amended and these ten participants were included in the final study. The questionnaire began with a vignette describing either a male or a female sexual offender who has returned to the community. The vignettes gave brief details of the perpetrator including; obtaining a new flat in a different area to where the offence was committed, starting a new job, joining a gym. These details were included to enable participants to focus their responses on a specific situation, to reduce chances of participant bias of their views of sexual offender reintegration. Although the vignettes did provide the age of perpetrator and victim, which was 17 for both, in order to imply that this was not a case of paedophilia or child abuse. There were 20 questions on both questionnaires; the same questions were asked, but gendered terms in the vignettes and questions were changed for each gender – his/her, Ashley/Ashleigh. An example question from the questionnaire was “Ashley should not be allowed to move on with his life”. Participants then selected their response for each question



using a five point Likert Scale, with one meaning “strongly disagree” and five meaning “strongly agree”. The scores on the questions were then totalled for each participant, with a higher score corresponding with more punitive attitudes.

### Results

Descriptive statistics were run on the data for the three variables being investigated, and the results are in Table 1 below.

Table 1:

*Means and standard deviations for participant gender, participant parental status and perpetrator gender*

		Mean	Standard Deviation
Participant Gender	Male	42.27	13.56
	Female	48.62	16.36
	Total	46.98	15.92
Parental Status	Parent	49.41	16.46
	Non-Parent	45.10	15.23
	Total	46.98	15.92
Perpetrator Gender	Male Perpetrator	46.38	15.67
	Female Perpetrator	47.24	16.04
	Total	46.98	15.92

A 2 (participant gender) x 2 (parent or non-parent) x 2 (perpetrator gender) between subjects Factorial ANOVA was conducted to explore attitude differences towards sexual offenders. A significant main effect of participant gender ( $F(1, 635) = 6.41, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$ ) and parent or non-parent ( $F(1, 635) = 4.65, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$ ) was found. Female participants held more punitive views compared to male participants and parents held more punitive views compared to non-parents. No significant main effect of perpetrator gender ( $F(1, 635) = .10, p = .756, \eta^2 = .00$ ) was found.

No significant interaction was found between participant gender and parent or non-parent ( $F(1, 635) = .43, p = .514, \eta^2 = .00$ ), or between participant gender and perpetrator gender ( $F(1, 635) = .74, p = .391, \eta^2 = .00$ ), or between participant gender and parent or non-parent ( $F(1, 635) = .44, p = .507, \eta^2 = .00$ ). There was also no significant interaction found between participant gender, parental status and perpetrator gender ( $F(1, 635) = .24, p = .625, \eta^2 = .00$ ).

### Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an insight into the general public's attitude towards sexual offenders returning to live in the community. Three variables were investigated: gender of participant, gender of perpetrator, and parental status of the participant. The following hypotheses were developed based upon the current research; (H1) men and women will have different punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders living back in the community, (H2) participants will be more punitive towards the female perpetrator than the male perpetrator and (H3) parents will have stronger punitive views towards sexual offenders compared to non-parents.

This study found that there was a significant difference in attitudes towards sexual offenders living back in the community between male and female participants; with female participants holding stronger punitive views than male participants. This finding supports research by Craig (2005) who found that female probation staff and residential hostel workers held stronger negative views towards sexual offenders compared to their male colleagues. However, this finding does not support the research of Hogue and Peebles (1997) who found that there were no significant differences in attitudes towards sexual offenders between male and female professionals who worked with sexual offenders and victims of sexually related crimes. A possible explanation for this could be that the participants of the current study were more representative of the general population; rather than a specific demographic (e.g.

probation staff). The limited research available supports the idea that the public holds more negative views towards sexual offenders compared to some professionals. For example, research by Johnson, Hughes and Ireland (2007) suggested that the public held more negative views towards sexual offenders in comparison to probationary police officers. Interestingly, research by Höing, Petrina, Hare Duke, Völlm, and Vogelvang, (2016) found that although females tended to hold more punitive views towards sexual offenders than males, females were more supportive of schemes such as Circles of Support and Accountability. This could be due to a maternal instinct of wanting to protect children, so one way of doing this would be to support such schemes to reduce recidivism.

The second hypothesis stated that participants would be more punitive towards the female perpetrator than the male perpetrator. No significant difference in attitudes towards male perpetrators and female perpetrators were found within this study. This finding does not support research by Viki et al. (2005) which stated that female perpetrators would be portrayed more negatively than male perpetrators. Bexson's (2011) suggestion that female perpetrators would receive more negative attention compared to male perpetrators is also not supported by these findings. A possible explanation for not finding a significance difference in attitudes towards male and female sexual offenders could be that attitudes have changed recently and that male and female perpetrators are viewed in a more equal way (e.g., Anderson, 2007). Even though this finding does not support current research, it can be considered to be a positive result in that male and female perpetrators, in this study at least, appear to have been treated and responded to in a very similar way. This should therefore support the notion that there should be parity when it comes to treating sexual offenders of either gender both within, and outside of the Criminal Justice System.

The third and final hypothesis stated that parents would have stronger punitive views towards sexual offenders living back in the community, compared to non-parents. A significant main effect of parental status was found, with parents holding stronger punitive views towards sexual offenders moving back to the community compared to non-parents. This finding supports research by Caputo and Brodsky (2004) who found that parents were more likely to support community notification of sexual offenders living within the community compared to non-parents. This finding also supports research by Zgoba, (2004) in that parents are more likely to support stronger measures (such as the Amber Alert system in America) to target sexual offenders. However, some research has implied that there is not any relationship between parental status and possessing different views towards sexual offenders

(Craun, 2010). Overall the findings support the majority of current research in that parents would hold stronger punitive views compared to non-parents.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations can be found within this study, the first of which can be found within the vignettes where the actual sexual offence has not been defined (e.g. indecent exposure, contact or non-contact). Omitting the offence description might have meant that participants were unable to make their minds up on their attitudes towards the sexual offenders in the scenario. One of main purposes of the study was to explore differences in attitudes towards sexual offenders living back in the community; by not defining the exact nature of the crime allowed participants to make their own minds up based on the information available which is usually the same level of information that would be available in a real-life situation (e.g. Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen, 2003). Another drawback could have been that participants randomly selected either a male or a female vignette based on a shape (circle or square) at the beginning of the online questionnaire. Ideally the questionnaire would have perhaps allocated a different vignette for each participant automatically which would have removed the participants' ability to select a vignette. This limitation has impacted upon the number of female vignettes completed in comparison to male vignettes, which has meant that the split is not as even as intended. Although a restriction, research on female sexual offenders is limited, so these findings can still potentially add to the limited research there currently is.

### **Future Research**

Future studies could attempt to explore if there are specific reasons as to why females tend to hold stronger punitive views compared to males; as well as why parents tend to hold stronger punitive views compared to non-parents. One way of attempting to explore this further could be to interview participants and attempt to gather richer data which could help researchers to explain why these populations hold stronger punitive views. This data could then be analysed using a method such as Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which would help to ascertain some of the reasoning behind the general attitudes found in the current study. This approach may allow participants to try and explain their attitudes towards sexual offenders and how these might have been formed. For a repeat study, the nature of the sexual offence could be stated to the participant. This would allow the participant to have a greater understanding of the nature of the offences which could impact upon their responses. While

the findings of the current study indicate that are attitude differences regarding sexual offenders, future, more in-depth, research could help to inform policy and practice around the way sexual offenders are reintegrated into the community.

### **Implications**

The results of the current study could be used in several ways. With regards to the general public, the findings from this study can be used to strengthen the notion that female perpetrators should be portrayed in a similar way to male perpetrators. This can be argued to be an important finding as it might help to challenge any views the public may hold with regards to males being more accountable than females, or that there are not as many female sexual offenders (Giguere & Bumby, 2007). In terms of the use of these findings for sexual offenders and those working with them, these results can be used to show the differences in attitudes between different populations and could be used to help an offender understand better how they might be perceived in society; which is particularly useful in helping them to accept reactions from the public once they are back in the community.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this study did find differences in attitudes towards sexual offenders living back in the community. The main findings were that female participants held more punitive views compared to male participants, parents held more punitive views compared to non-parents and that there were no differences in attitudes regarding the gender of the perpetrator. One aspect which certainly needs to be considered for the future is how sexual offenders are expected to reintegrate back into society if a large part of society holds such strong negative views towards that population. There are certainly a lot of aspects to consider and future research should consider investigating these in order to not only assist sexual offenders with their journey to living back in society; but how to keep communities happy and how to avoid hostility towards sexual offenders.

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