

# Exploring Perceptions of Safety: Developing Safety and Support Measures to Assess Public Attitudes of Sex Offense Registration<sup>1</sup>



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## Abstract

Sex offense registration and notification policies in the United States have developed through strong public support. Despite positive intentions, significant flaws in the current registration system have been identified. Due to their socially driven nature, examining public perceptions of safety and support for registration policies is needed. In a series of studies, we expand upon previous research by developing and validating two self-report scales that capture perceptions of safety related to sex offense registration and support for registration policies. We then employ these scales to determine if perceptions of safety and support can be modified by exposure to information regarding the costliness and ineffectiveness of registration systems. Results reveal that individuals' sense of safety related to registries and their support for registries were reduced, at least in the short-term, when exposed to this information. Post-test findings, however, demonstrate that parents still were significantly more supportive of registries than non-parents. Results inform future research that seeks to examine potential alternatives to sex offense registration, despite ongoing public support for such policies.

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## Introduction

Sex offenses have commanded more public outrage than any other type of criminal offense in the United States (Pittman & Nguyen, 2011), and convicted offenders have historically been exposed to harsh treatment and severe sentencing (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004). In response to a few, highly tragic cases, sex offense policies arose with unparalleled public support. Starting in the 1990s, legislative actions have led to enhanced residence restrictions and strict offense registration guidelines. Unfortunately, researchers have found little evidence supporting the effectiveness of these policies in reducing recidivism or promoting community safety (Agan, 2011; Kernsmith et al., 2009; Prescott & Rockoff, 2009). The purpose of this current study is two-fold. First, we sought to develop psychometrically reliable scales to assess perceptions of safety and public support for registration policies, since none currently exist and there is widespread variability in the literature assessing these topics. Second, given the socially driven nature of these policies, we sought to test how experimental exposure to information regarding the current registration system relates to perceptions of safety and public support. The goal was to examine the malleability of public perceptions surrounding these topics.

Critique of U.S. registration policies has been extensive. Critics have referenced these policies as being *crime control theater* (CCT) laws (Budd & Mancini, 2016). CCT laws are those which arise as a reactionary response to a situation (e.g., tragic sexual crimes against children) and lead to unquestioned acceptance and promotion of the law (Griffin & Miller, 2008). Sex offense registration policies require certain information regarding individuals convicted of sex offenses (e.g., location of residence) to be made publicly available through a national registration database (Ackerman et al., 2011; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). These laws are intended to prevent recidivism and to increase public safety (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Despite the positive intentions of policymakers, researchers have found no reduction in recidivism rates or decreased arrest rates for sexual offenses after registries have been implemented (Agan, 2011). Additionally, registries come with unexpected costs and consequences. Little consideration initially was given to the substantial ongoing costs, in terms of federal and state resources, associated with implementing and maintaining the registries (Pittman & Nguyen, 2011). Collateral consequences for the registrants also may have been poorly understood; these include social ostracism, difficulty reentering society, emotional issues, employment barriers, housing difficulties, and harassment (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Researchers have speculated that such collateral consequences imposed on registrants may indirectly increase recidivism (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

Furthermore, an important issue regarding the implementation of registries lies within the requirement of citizen action. Sex offense laws have public safety intentions. Community members, however, must access the registries for these goals to be achieved (Anderson, Evans, & Sample, 2009). The burden is placed on the public to explore the registries online and seek out this information (Boyle et al., 2014). There is accumulating evidence that few citizens choose to access registries or act upon the information they contain, despite their support for such policies (Anderson, Evans, & Sample, 2009; Anderson & Sample, 2008). Access rates also have been found to differ by gender and whether an individual has children living in their home (Anderson, Evans, & Sample, 2009; Anderson & Sample, 2008). Irrespective of whether they choose to access registries, the ability to obtain such information may make people feel safer in general (Anderson & Sample, 2008). An exploration of perceptions of safety can help to explain why strong public support remains for registration policies that lack the intended impacts. Through a series of studies, we developed new scales to examine attitudes toward sex offense registries, sought to better understand registry access behaviors, and assess whether registry attitudes could be manipulated by exposure to informational cues. In Pilot Study 1, we developed and tested two scales to assess (1) support for sex offense registries and (2) perceptions of safety related to sex offense registries. We validated these scales on an undergraduate sample. In Pilot Study 2, we refined our new measures using a more diverse, community-based sample. Finally, in our primary study, we experimentally tested whether exposure to information highlighting the potential issues of sex offense registries (e.g., costliness, ineffectiveness, and collateral consequences) could impact attitudes using a pre/post-test survey design. By applying an experimental approach, we assessed the malleability of attitudes surrounding sex offense registration.

## **Pilot Study 1**

To our knowledge, no valid and reliable scales have been developed for measuring perceptions of support or safety related to sex offense policies. Researchers have instead largely relied on single items to assess public perceptions of support for registry policies by asking questions such as whether community notification makes individuals who have committed sex offenses reoffend less often (Philips, 1998) or if community notification policies are effective (Levenson et al., 2007). Often, such studies also measure perceptions of safety through single-items such as whether community notification has resulted in the participant being more safety conscious (Philips, 1998) or if the information in sex offense registries will help keep them and their family safe (Anderson & Sample, 2008). Comparing results from extant studies

has been difficult due to this diversity in how support and perceptions of safety have been measured. Thus, the purpose of this pilot study was to develop and validate a public perception scale related to the safety and support of sex offense registries.

### ***Respondents and Procedures***

Respondents were recruited at a large public western university in 2016 and offered course extra credit to participate. In total, 280 undergraduate students began the study which was in the form of a survey on Qualtrics. Of those 280, thirteen cases were deleted due to missing data, resulting in 267 undergraduates that completed the survey. Respondents all identified as either male (n = 111) or female (n = 156). Only 19 reported being a parent and 26.6% identified as a minority race. The mean age of respondents was 22 years.

### ***Item Development***

As the primary goal of this pilot study was to develop valid and reliable measures related to perceptions of registration policies, we first generated a pool of items conceptually drawn from a review of previous studies that probed perceptions of safety and support (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Levenson et al., 2007; Philips, 1998). Examples included *"sex offender registration laws prevent future sex crimes by acting as a deterrent to potential offenders"* and *"having access to sex offender registration websites allows me to take increased safety precautions to help me protect myself and/or my family."* Responses were on a five-point Likert scale (1=disagree to 5=agree). The final wording of items went through several rounds of review and revision to consider content and breadth, assess face validity, and improve comprehension. This process resulted in an initial pool of 26 items.

## **Results and Discussion**

An exploratory factor analysis with a varimax rotation identified the underlying factors within this pool of items. To determine the number of components, we examined eigenvalues and the scree plot from the principal components analysis. These aligned with our expectations that two factors would emerge. Thus, we ran a second principal components analysis, this time with two fixed factors. A varimax rotation again was employed, and items with substantial remaining cross-loading were removed (<.2 between factor loadings). As recommended by Mertler and Vannatta (2005), items with factor loadings above .50 were retained.

The goal of these procedures was to develop a psychometrically refined measure that could be reliably used to assess registration attitudes. Given the

cutoff criteria described previously, our original 26 items were reduced to sixteen items comprising two factors; safety and support. The first factor assesses perceptions of safety as it relates to sex offense registries and resulted in eight items ( $\alpha = .81$ ). The second factor assessing support for registration yielded eight items ( $\alpha = .75$ ). In this first round of scale development, a primary limitation was that very few individuals in the sample were parents. We anticipated parent-status to be an important factor on this topic, therefore, we conducted the second study to complete a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on these scales with a more diverse, community sample. Items from pilot study 1 and their factor loadings can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. Factor Loadings of the Safety and Support Subscales (Pilot Study 1)**

Item	Factor Loadings
I feel safer knowing I am able to access registration information for offenders in my neighborhood. <i>SF</i>	.61
Having access to sex offender registration websites allows me to take increased safety precautions to help me protect myself and/or my family. <i>SF</i>	.58
Individuals who access sex offender registration websites are less likely to be victimized. <i>R SF</i>	.55
If there is a registered sex offender living in your community, accessing the registration website makes you safer because you have information regarding their identity and location. <i>SF</i>	.65
Sex offender registration websites are effective in increasing public safety. <i>SF</i>	.69
Sex offender registration laws prevent future sex crimes by acting as a deterrent to potential offenders. <i>SF</i>	.62
Having to register on a sex offender registration website causes offenders to be more likely to positively control their behavior because they know others are monitoring them. <i>SF</i>	.67
Sex offender registration websites help sex offenders not reoffend. <i>SF</i>	.68
All individuals who are convicted of a sex crime should be required to register on the sex offender registration website regardless of offense. <i>SP</i>	.56
Sex offender registration websites are unfairly harsh, requiring offenders to further be punished after serving their sentence. <i>SP</i>	.69
Even if research indicates that offense rates of sex offenders do not change as a result of registration websites, these websites should continue to be offered. <i>R SP</i>	.54
All sex offenders should be required to register on the website regardless of type of offense, age/sex of the victim, and how many times the individual has offended. <i>SP</i>	.59

Being registered on a sex offender website puts an individual at higher risk to be targeted or harassed by community members. <i>SP</i> .	.53
Sex offender registration websites have negative psychological impacts on individuals who are required to register. <i>SP</i>	.63
Only sex offenders that have committed offenses against children should be required to publicly register on the websites. <i>SP</i>	.55

*Note.* R = Reverse scored item. SF = Safety. SP = Support.

## Pilot Study 2

Pilot study 2 sought to investigate the latent factor structure of the two-factor measure developed in pilot study 1 using CFA. This allowed us to use additional criteria (e.g., factor loadings and model fit) to develop the final scales using a more diverse sample than in pilot study 1. We also sought to examine the prevalence and reasons that participants access registries with this community sample.

## Method

### ***Respondents and Procedures***

Respondents were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in 2017 and screened to ensure they were over the age of 18 and U.S. citizens. Once consent was obtained, they were provided a link to the survey on Qualtrics. Respondents were awarded \$2.50 upon completion of the survey.

### ***Measures***

*Demographics.* Demographic information included the respondents’ age, gender, race, SES, and type of region where the participant grew up (urban, suburban, or rural).

*Safety Scale.* This eight item scale measures perceptions of safety related to sex offense registries. These items were selected through the exploratory factor analytic procedures in pilot study 1. Respondents were asked to rate the items on a five-point Likert scale (1=disagree to 5=agree).

*Support Scale.* This eight item scale measures support for sex offense registries. These items were selected through the exploratory factor analytic procedures in pilot study 1. Respondents were asked to rate the items on a five-point Likert scale (1=disagree to 5=agree).

*Access Rates.* We assessed access rates via a series of eight items asking whether

participants have accessed registries and why. The first item probed respondents if they had ever accessed a registry. If they indicated that they had accessed a registry, they received several follow up questions which asked about their reasons for accessing the registry, how often they had done so, and if they took any preventative measures following their access. If the respondent indicated that they had never accessed a registry, they were asked to indicate why.

## Results and Discussion

### Demographics

The final sample comprised 340 respondents; 58.8% male, 72.4% white/Caucasian, and 35.7% parents. For a complete review of the demographics, see Table 2.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables Used in Analyses (Pilot Study 2)**

	N = 340	
	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Male</i>	200	58.8
<i>Female</i>	140	41.2
<b>Race</b>		
<i>Asian or Pacific Islander</i>	40	11.8
<i>Black or African American</i>	23	6.8
<i>Hispanic or Latino</i>	28	8.2
<i>Native American or Alaskan Native</i>	1	.30
<i>White or Caucasian</i>	246	72.4
<i>Other or Multiracial</i>	2	.60
<b>Community Grew Up In</b>		
<i>Urban</i>	116	34.3
<i>Suburban</i>	162	47.9
<i>Rural</i>	60	17.8
<b>Parent</b>		
<i>Yes</i>	121	35.7
<i>No</i>	218	64.3
	Mean	Range
<b>Age</b>	34.33	19-70

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a CFA to determine if the latent variables found from pilot study 1 demonstrated construct validity and adequate model fit. Guidelines for assessing model fit were based upon fit indicators such as a non-significant chi-square,

comparative fit (with values being over .90) (Kline, 2011), and RMSEA indices (values under .08) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Further, we expected the items to be highly correlated and wanted to remove highly overlapping items. Thus, we used a conservative cutoff criterion to remove any items with factor loadings .60 and below. Since we expected our latent variables to be correlated, support and safety were correlated in our model. Additionally, several error terms for each factor were correlated as we expected these to impact the fit indices. The final factors were determined to have “marginal fit” as they met the minimum threshold for at least two of the three fit indices being used ( $\chi^2(19) = 50.445, p < .000, RMSEA = .071, and CFI = .981$ ).

The safety factor was reduced to five items and the support factor was reduced to four items. Both the safety ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and support scales ( $\alpha = .86$ ) achieved excellent reliability with this new sample. Factor loadings for the two-factor model can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3. Factor Loadings of the Safety and Support Subscales (Pilot Study 2)**

Item	Factor Loadings
I feel safer knowing I am able to access registration information for offenders in my neighborhood. <i>SF</i>	.83
Having access to sex offender registration websites allows me to take increased safety precautions to help me protect myself and/or my family. <i>SF</i>	.82
Individuals who access sex offender registration websites are less likely to be victimized. <i>R SF</i>	.67
If there is a registered sex offender living in your community, accessing the registration website makes you safer because you have information regarding their identity and location. <i>SF</i>	.79
Sex offender registration websites are effective in increasing public safety. <i>SF</i>	.82
All individuals who are convicted of a sex crime should be required to register on the sex offender registration website regardless of offense. <i>SP</i>	.75
Sex offender registration websites are unfairly harsh, requiring offenders to further be punished after serving their sentence. <i>SP</i>	.73
Even if research indicates that offense rates of sex offenders do not change as a result of registration websites, these websites should continue to be offered. <i>R SP</i>	.83
All sex offenders should be required to register on the website regardless of type of offense, age/sex of the victim, and how many times the individual has offended. <i>SP</i>	.71

*Note.* R = Reverse scored item. SF = Safety. SP = Support.

### **Relationship between Scale Scores**

A Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between perceptions of safety and support for sex offense registration using the final scales developed in pilot study 2. There was a significant positive correlation between the scales,  $r = .604$ ,  $n = 332$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consistent with our expectation, the safer an individual feels due to being able to access sex offense registration websites, the more likely they are to support these registries.

### **Access of Registries**

Access rates were examined to determine the frequency with which the participants accessed sex offense registry websites and their reasoning behind why they chose to or not. In this online community sample, 46.7% reported that they had accessed an online sex offense registration website (see Table 4). Females were slightly more likely to report having accessed a sex offense registry. Most participants who accessed the registry reported doing so out of curiosity. Of those who did not access a registry, the majority reported that they were not interested in doing so. Of those who did report accessing a registry, access was infrequent; over 95% reported doing so either once or only a few times. Additionally, only 24.8% reported that they had taken some form of preventative measure after registry access. These measures ranged from being more cautious around neighbors and strangers to installing home security systems. Other preventive measures reported included talking to their children and family about individuals who have been convicted of a sex offense, increased supervision of children around that individual, refraining from renting or buying a home near that individual, and informing other neighbors of that individual's presence.

**Table 4 Access of Sex Offender Registries (Pilot Study 2)**

<b>Access Rates</b>	<b>% Reported</b>
<b>Has ever accessed an online sex offender registration website.</b>	(n=157) 46.7%
Gender of those who have accessed the registry:	
<i>Male</i>	48.4%
<i>Female</i>	51.6%
Parent-status of those who have accessed the registry:	
<i>Parent</i>	52.9%
<i>Not a parent</i>	47.1%
Race of those who have accessed the registry	
<i>White / Caucasian</i>	77.7%
<i>Black / African American</i>	4.5%
<i>Hispanic / Latino</i>	8.3%
<i>Asian / Pacific Islander</i>	8.3%
<i>Other / Biracial</i>	1.2%
Reason for accessing the registry:	

<i>Out of curiosity.</i>	59.9%
<i>For the safety of their own children and/or children in their care.</i>	26.1%
<i>For their own personal protection.</i>	10.8%
<i>For work purposes, to check out personal caregivers, or "other reasons."</i>	3.2%
How often the respondent accessed the registry:	
<i>Just the one time.</i>	49.0%
<i>A few times.</i>	46.5%
<i>A few times per month.</i>	3.2%
<i>On a weekly basis.</i>	1.3%
Were any preventative measures taken after accessing the registry?	
Yes	24.8%
<b>Has never accessed an online sex offender registration website.</b>	(n=179) 53.3%
Reason for not accessing the registry:	
<i>Was not interested in doing so.</i>	72.6%
<i>Did not know how to access the registration website</i>	16.8%
<i>Did not understand the purpose of registries or chose not to for "other reasons."</i>	10.6%

Note. N = 340.

## Primary Study

In our pilot studies, we developed, refined, and tested two new scales measuring safety and support for sex offense registration. As such, in this primary study we sought to employ these newly developed scales to determine if perceptions of safety and support could be modified by exposure to information regarding the costliness and ineffectiveness of registration systems. To do so, respondents were randomly exposed to this information through a pre-test x post-test design to control for pre-test registration attitudes. With this design, we hoped to detect attitudinal shifts as a result of this experimental manipulation. Based on previous findings that found having a child living in the home impacted access rates (Anderson, Evans, & Sample, 2009; Anderson & Sample, 2008), we sought to control for having a child in the home in our analyses as well. In this study we asked two questions: (1) are you a parent and (2) do you have any children living in your home. Based on a crosstabs analysis, we found that all respondents who reported that they were a parent also reported that they had a child living in their home. Since the 'parent' and 'child in home' responses were identical in this sample, we refer to this variable as *parents* in our analyses.

## Method

### ***Respondents and Procedures***

Respondents were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in 2018, screened to ensure they were over the age of 18, and citizens of the United States.

Once consent was obtained, respondents were provided a link to the survey on Qualtrics. Through Qualtrics, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (experimental or control [the content of these conditions is described in the measures section]). Respondents were awarded \$2.50 upon completion of the survey. The final sample for this study comprised 509 respondents; 60.9% male, 77.3% white/Caucasian, and 41.7% parents. Additionally, 15.2% of the total sample indicated that they personally knew someone currently on a sex offense registry.

### Measures

*Demographics.* Demographic information included the respondents' age, gender, race, parent-status, type of region where the participant grew up (urban, suburban, or rural), and whether the respondent knows anyone that is currently registered on a sex offender registry (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables Used in Analyses (Primary Study)**

	N = 509	
	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Male</i>	308	60.9
<i>Female</i>	195	38.5
<i>Transgender</i>	2	.4
<i>Other</i>	1	.2
<b>Race</b>		
<i>Asian or Pacific Islander</i>	27	5.3
<i>Black or African American</i>	43	8.5
<i>Hispanic or Latino</i>	26	5.1
<i>Native American or Alaskan Native</i>	11	2.2
<i>White or Caucasian</i>	392	77.3
<i>Other or Multiracial</i>	8	1.6
<b>Community Grew Up In</b>		
<i>Urban</i>	173	34.1
<i>Suburban</i>	239	47.1
<i>Rural</i>	95	18.7
<b>Parent</b>		
<i>Yes</i>	212	41.7
<i>No</i>	297	58.3
<b>Do you know anyone who is required to register on a sex offense registry?</b>		
<i>Yes</i>	77	15.2
<i>No</i>	431	84.8
	Mean	Range
<b>Age</b>	34.95	18-74

*Safety Scale.* This five item scale measures perceptions of safety related to sex offense registries. The finalized scale items were selected through the factor analytic procedures of our pilot studies. Respondents were asked to rate the items on a five-point Likert scale (1=disagree to 5=agree). A total score was created by summing the five items. Higher scores indicate increased perceptions of safety because of access to sex offense registries.

*Support Scale.* This four item scale measures support for sex offense registries. The finalized scale items were selected through the factor analytic procedures of our pilot studies. Respondents were asked to rate the items on a five-point Likert scale (1=disagree to 5=agree). A total score was created by summing the four ratings, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of support for sex offense registries.

*Condition Frames and Content.* Respondents were asked to read one of two articles to which they were randomly assigned. The articles were approximately equivalent in length and reading level. The control article was entitled the *Psychology of Roller Coasters*. The experimental article was entitled *Sex Offender Registries: Are They Really Making Us Safer?* This article reviews the history and purpose of registries. The article also highlights the commonly cited criticisms culled from the literature on registries, including their lack of scientific evidence for effectiveness, the burden they place on the public, flaws in the classification system, difficulty maintaining up-to-date and accurate information, and the costs and resource allocation to maintain them. Each article also included two follow-up questions as attention checks to ensure respondent read each article thoroughly.

*Brief Social Desirability Scale (BSDS).* This four-item scale examines respondents' social desirability and is adapted from the 33 item Marlowe Crowne Inventory (1960) (Haghighat, 2007). The Brief Social Desirability Scale (BSDS) has been extensively examined and found to be valid, reliable, and free from gender specificity (Haghighat, 2007). An example item in this scale is "Do you always practice what you preach?" Each question is answered by selecting *yes* or *no*.

## Results and Discussion

Reliabilities were conducted on both scales at each time point; pre-test safety ( $\alpha = .88$ ), post-test safety ( $\alpha = .92$ ), pre-test support ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and post-test support ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Correlations also were conducted between the scales for each time point. As expected, support and safety scores were significantly positively correlated for both the pre-test ( $r = .695$ ,  $n = 494$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and post-test ( $r = .720$ ,  $n = 497$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The BSDS had moderate reliability ( $\alpha = .65$ ), which is consistent with previous

applications of this scale across numerous studies. BSDS scores were significantly correlated with each of the safety and support scale scores, demonstrating that those with higher social desirability scores also had higher scores for support and safety at both time points. See Table 6 for all correlational findings.

**Table 6. Correlations between BSDS, Safety, and Support (Primary Study)**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. BSDS N=509	2.02	1.34				
2. Safety (pre) N=499	18.77	4.72	.21***			
3. Safety (post) N=500	17.68	5.49	.27***	.84***		
4. Support (pre) N=504	14.14	4.56	.22***	.70***	.66***	
5. Support (post) N=506	13.51	4.90	.25***	.62***	.72***	.85***

Note. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. \*\*\* $p < .001$

We first conducted a two-way ANCOVA to examine the interaction between condition and parent-status in terms of post-test perception of support scores, after adjusting for pre-test perceptions of support scores. Normality checks were performed and Levene's test was significant ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that the homogeneity of variance assumption had been violated. As recommend by Pallant (2010), when this assumption is not met, a more stringent significance cutoff of  $p = .01$  is applied. There was not a significant interaction between condition and parent-status. There was a main effect indicating significant difference in support scores [ $F(2,497) = 26.33, p < .001$ ] between the conditions, with a medium effect size of .05. Post hoc examination revealed there was a significant difference between the conditions ( $p < .001$ ), with estimated marginal means showing that those in the experimental condition ( $M = 12.95, SE = .16$ ) reported significantly lower levels of support than those in the control condition ( $M = 14.10, SE = .16$ ). There also was a main effect indicating significant difference in support scores [ $F(2,497) = 7.09, p = .008$ ] between parents and non-parents, with a small effect size of .01. Post hoc examination revealed a significant difference between parent statuses ( $p < .001$ ) with estimated marginal means showing that those who are a parent ( $M = 13.87, SE = .18$ ) reported significantly higher perceptions of support than those who are not ( $M = 13.26, SE = .15$ ). In this model, our covariate also was significant, these pre-test support scores explain 73.0% of the variance in post-test support scores.

Next, a two-way ANCOVA was conducted to examine whether there was a two-way interaction between condition and parent-status in terms of post-test perception of safety scores, after adjusting for pre-test perceptions of safety scores. Normality checks were performed and Levene's test was significant ( $p = .001$ ), indicating that the homogeneity of variance assumption had been violated. Results revealed no significant interaction between condition and parent-status. There was a main effect indicating a significant difference in safety scores [ $F(2,485) = 27.82, p < .001$ ] between the conditions, with a medium effect size of .05. Post hoc examination revealed a significant difference between the conditions ( $p < .001$ ), with estimated marginal means indicating that those in the experimental condition ( $M = 17.03, SE = .18$ ) reported significantly lower perceptions of safety than those in the control condition ( $M = 18.43, SE = .19$ ). There also was a main effect indicating significant difference in safety scores [ $F(2,185) = 9.42, p = .002$ ] between parents and those who are not, with a small effect size of .02. Post hoc examination revealed there was a significant difference between parent statuses ( $p < .001$ ) with estimated marginal means showing that those who are a parent ( $M = 19.14, SE = .21$ ) reported significantly higher perceptions of safety than those not a parent ( $M = 17.32, SE = .17$ ). In this model, our covariate also was significant, these pre-test safety scores explain 71.4% of the variance in post-test safety scores.

To summarize, these findings demonstrate that the experimental condition reduced perceptions of safety related to sex offense registration *and* support for sex offense registration when controlling for initial perceptions. We found that utilizing a detailed article manipulation impacted perceptions within this brief time frame. Further, these findings indicate that parent-status also is important; with parent scores for perceptions of support and safety being significantly higher than non-parents after the manipulation. It is possible that parents may be more emotionally connected to these perceptions and thus are more resistant to changing their perceptions than non-parents after being exposed to the experimental information.

## General Discussion

Together, these results contribute to the literature in several important ways. First, in our pilot studies we developed valid and reliable scales to assess perceptions of safety and support as they relate to sex offense registration. Previously, researchers have assessed these constructs through single-item measures that varied across studies. While some of our findings may seem intuitive, such as the correlational relationship between safety and support, this is the first time this relationship is confirmed with psychometrically refined measures. The succinct

measures we developed are useful as they allow future researchers to replicate these findings, compare results across studies, and expand upon the current research on this topic in a more systematic manner.

Pilot study 2 also provided a deeper understanding of access and use of information regarding registries. Based on the intent of sex offense policies, we know public action is necessary. This means that the public must access the registries to obtain information or take preventative measures. In our sample from pilot study 2, less than half of the respondents had previously accessed a registry and of those, half accessed a registry only once. Most respondents who did not access registries attributed this to disinterest. Of those who did access registries, over half reported that their primary reason was curiosity. Further, of those who did access registration websites, only a quarter reported taking some type of preventative measure—most often through increasing supervision of their children or paying more attention to their neighbors. These findings underscore the challenges facing policymakers seeking to improve current registration policies. If future efforts are made to enhance the existing registration system, these should focus on increasing the public education and action components. Community members should be well-informed not only of the information that exists, but how to use it effectively to increase safety.

In our Primary Study we used an experimental manipulation with a pre-test/post-test design to examine if information regarding the ineffectiveness and cost of registries could impact attitudes. In this study, changes to attitudes were evident in our brief timeframe. The experimental condition reduced perceptions of safety related to sex offense registration and support for sex offense registration when controlling for initial perceptions, and we found parent-status also is important; parent support and safety scores were significantly higher than non-parents after the manipulation.

It is important to note, however, that even though scores for support and safety were reduced after exposure to the experimental condition – support and safety scores remained generally high. With a maximum score of 25 on the safety scale, the post ‘safety’ score for those in the experimental condition had a mean of 17.03 indicating that respondents reported feeling safer on the whole just knowing that registries exist and can be accessed. With a maximum score of 20 on the support scale, the post ‘support’ score for those in the experimental condition had a mean of 12.95 indicating that respondents still leaned toward being supportive of the use of registries.

These findings are useful in that they demonstrate that perceptions surrounding sex offense registration are malleable, at least in the short-term. They are

promising for policy-reform efforts since they signal the potential for attitudinal change on these topics, but also identify a key demographic (parents) that may be particularly resistant to efforts to influence their opinions on these issues.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Beyond the routine cautions associated with cross-sectional studies, several limitations should be noted when interpreting our results. While we were able to establish a positive relationship between perception of safety and support for registration, we are unable to provide evidence in this study that perception of safety causes subsequent support. Future studies should examine this relationship longitudinally to assess causality, as well as the stability of the attitudinal shifts reported here. In addition, although our use of MTurk provided a more diverse and generalizable sample of respondents, it is likely that MTurk respondents are more tech-savvy and avid users of the internet than the general public (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013). Thus, responding to our online survey also means it is possible these respondents are more likely to have accessed online registration websites in comparison to the general public.

Future studies that aim to assess registration attitudes (and their malleability) should evaluate alternative formats of information on this emotionally charged topic. Identifying the best formats for persuasion is necessary if policymakers hope to effectively influence public support surrounding current sex offense policies. Further, employing differing formats can help policy makers identify the most effective framing and communication strategies, particularly among parents, as this subgroup may be the most resistant to changing their support of current registration policies.

Current registration policy suffers from a lack of research regarding the effectiveness of sex offense registration (Agan, 2011), the high costs to society (Pittman & Nguyen, 2011), and the potential collateral consequences these policies may have on registrants (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). It is not surprising that these factors have led to a recent rise in research and media attention on the current state of the registration system and potential alternatives to current registration policies. Current findings promisingly indicate that influencing these perceptions may be possible, although more research is needed to understand the most effective communication strategies on this topic.

Changing opinions surrounding the current system will be an important initial step to any potential reform. Future policymakers and policy reform advocates will need to frame effectiveness information in a more persuasive manner, further

emphasizing the negative effects and failures of current registration policy, while presenting viable alternatives to assess if such an approach can impact registration attitudes. We also anticipate that the rise of social networking apps (e.g., Nextdoor), that allow for increased dissemination of neighborhood-level information will impact registry attitudes. While it is likely that sharing information regarding registrants in the community may exacerbate existing negative attitudes or perpetuate existing myths, it is possible such social-networking platforms may be used as a tool for reaching and educating community members. Further research will be needed to explicate the ways in which these emerging technologies shape public attitudes around this topic.

In addition to assessing attitudes of current sex offense policies, we believe it is important to examine public attitudes toward potential alternative practices. Potential alternative strategies to registration (or changes to current registration policies) should be gauged on their potential to increase public safety and help individuals who have been convicted of sex offenses successfully reintegrate into communities. Our hope is that current findings, and the safety and support scales we developed and refined, will aid researchers in exploring more effective alternatives to sex offense registration.

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