

# The Influence of Victim Type on the Public's Perceptions of Sex Offender Registration and Notification



## Corey Call<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The broad category of “sex offenders” is comprised of a diverse set of individuals with different characteristics, backgrounds, and offending patterns, however, sex offenders are generally treated as a homogenous group. This can be evidenced in policy decisions, such as sex offender registration and notification (SORN) that treat sex offenders as if they were all alike. Research exploring the attitudes of the public toward sex offenders and sex offender management policies have historically treated these offenders the same way by only surveying the public about “sex offenders” with no differentiation between types of sex offenders. The present study addresses this issue by surveying a national sample (n=1,023) of the general public on their attitudes toward SORN while making a distinction between sex offenders with adult victims and sex offenders with child victims. The results reveal significant differences in belief in the effectiveness of SORN, support for SORN, and support for the removal of sex offenders from registries based upon a sex offender’s preferred victim type.

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<sup>1</sup> Longwood University

### Corresponding Author:

Corey Call  
callcp@longwood.edu

## Introduction

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), there are currently over 850,000 registered sex offenders residing in the United States (NCMEC, 2017). “Sex offender” is a label used to represent a diverse group of offenders. Their crimes involve a sexual component, but sex offenders vary in their personal characteristics, backgrounds, skills, deficits, victim choices, offending characteristics, and recidivism rates (Vandiver, Braithwaite, & Strafford, 2017). Despite their diversity, sex offenders are treated as a homogenous group when it comes to the policies used to manage them.

Since 1996, every state has been required to place individuals convicted of sex offenses on registries and make these registries publicly available, a management policy referred to as sex offender registration and notification (SORN) (Welchan, 2005). Although SORN was originally intended to protect children from sexual victimization, it has evolved as a means of also identifying sex offenders who prey on adults as well as non-contact sex offenders such as buyers of child pornography (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). SORN is a blanket policy that treats this very diverse offending population as if they were all the same. For instance, individual state sex offender registries classify sex offenders differently for the purposes of reporting, registration length, and level of community notification. Some states utilize a single-level of classification where no distinction is made among the sex offenders while other states categorize the registrants into just two or three broad categories based upon their convicted offenses and presumed safety risk (Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky, & Levenson, 2010).

Empirical research continually falls into the same trapping of using the nonspecific label of “sex offender” and generally does not make any distinctions between types of sex offenders. Specifically, when examining perceptions of SORN, respondents are generally asked about their belief in SORN’s effectiveness on “sex offender” recidivism or their support for the registering of sex “offenders” (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009; Cubellis, Walfield, & Harris, 2018; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2010; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012; Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Payne, 2011). This approach is problematic as it perpetuates the myth that sex offenders are a homogenous group, reinforces the wording in the flawed policies, and does not enable a full understanding of attitudes toward the policies. The present study addresses these issues by examining public perceptions of SORN on two types of sex offenders: those who sexually offend against adults and those who sexually offend against children.

## Legislation History

Legislation has been used to manage sex offenders since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These early laws, called “sexual psychopath laws,” emphasized incapacitation and treatment; typically calling for the civil commitment of offenders to hospitals where they would receive treatment and then be released after an indeterminate amount of time (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, support for the sexual psychopath laws had waned as the statutes were criticized for their ineffectiveness in rehabilitating offenders and faced legal scrutiny for a variety of constitutional violations, including the offenders’ right to due process, equal protection under the law (for determining whether an offender was a sexual psychopath), and the detention of offenders for long and indiscriminate periods of time (Palermo & Farkas, 2001).

Beginning in the early 1990s, there was a renewed interest in sex offender management policies following two high-profile cases of child abduction and murder. Subsequently, the public demanded increased protection of children from sex offenders (Meloy, Saleh, & Wolff, 2007). In 1989, 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling was abducted while riding his bicycle in Minnesota. It was discovered during the investigation that a halfway house in the neighborhood sheltered recently released sex offenders (Levenson & D’Amora, 2007). In 1994, Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offenders Act (commonly referred to as the “Jacob Wetterling Act”) which required every state to create registries for those individuals convicted of crimes against children as well as sexually violent crimes and ordered the offenders to update their information annually with local law enforcement (Terry, 2013).

The same year the Jacob Wetterling Act was passed, 7-year-old Megan Kanka was sexually assaulted and strangled to death in New Jersey by a twice-convicted sex offender living in her neighborhood that had coerced her into his home. Her parents were unaware of the sex offender living in their neighborhood and argued that if they had been informed of his presence then perhaps her death could have been averted (Levenson & D’Amora, 2007). In 1996, President Clinton signed an amendment to the Jacob Wetterling Act, entitled Megan’s Law, which required states to make their previously created sex offender registries publicly accessible (Welchan, 2005).

Today, every state has enacted some form of SORN, however, states vary in their implementation of the policy. For example, states vary in the lengths of time that individuals must remain registered. Almost all states require certain types of sex offenders to register for life, however 11 states require all convicted sex offenders to be registered for life, while 36 states have a 10-15-year registration requirement

for different types of sex offenders, and 11 states have a 16-25-year registration requirement (Mancini, Barnes, & Mears, 2013). States also vary in the types of information that are displayed on their sex offender registries. Certain characteristics are presented on nearly all sex offender registries such as a photograph of the offender, home address of the offender, and convicted offense(s) that required registration, while other characteristics are shared by only a limited number of registry webpages such as descriptions of their offense(s), length of sentence, and employer information (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2013). Additionally, since implementation, every state has also altered their SORN policies at least once with these alterations generally tightening supervision procedures or expanding the scope of supervision (e.g., electronic monitoring, requiring more information for registry pages, and shortening deadlines for updating registry information) (Lytle, 2019).

### *Effectiveness*

SORN is designed to act as a deterrent against sex offending by attempting to prevent currently registered offenders from recidivating as well as discouraging potential offenders from committing a sexual offense for fear of becoming a registered sex offender. The effectiveness of SORN is highly questionable and has been the subject of criticism since the inception of the policy. Numerous studies have indicated that SORN has had little to no statistically significant effect on sex offender recidivism rates (Agan, 2011; Freeman, 2012; Letourneau, Levenson, Bandyopadhyay, Armstrong, & Sinha, 2010; Levenson & Zgoba, 2016; Maddan, Miller, Walker, & Marshall, 2011; Zgoba, Jennings, & Salerno, 2018). In the most recent evaluation of SORN's effect on recidivism, Zgoba and colleagues (2018) examined the recidivism (sexual and general) rates of 547 convicted sex offenders in New Jersey who were released from prison prior to and subsequent to the passage of Megan's Law. Following the offenders for an average of 15 years, no significant differences in recidivism rates were uncovered.

In addition to SORN's lack of influence on recidivism rates, SORN has also been criticized for its negative impact on sex offender reintegration. Multiple studies suggest that registered sex offenders experience a variety of unintended consequences stemming from SORN including difficulties finding and maintaining housing (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008), difficulties finding and maintaining employment (Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), social isolation (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Mercado et al., 2008), declines in emotional and psychological well-being (Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012;

Tewksbury, 2012), and threats and harassment (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

### *Public Opinion*

Despite its shortcomings, the public is largely in support of SORN and believes that the policy is effective in preventing sexual victimization (Comartin et al., 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; Levenson, et al., 2007; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009).

Surveying Florida residents, Levenson and colleagues (2007) found that community members reported a strong belief (83%) that SORN is effective in reducing sex offenses. Interestingly, almost three-quarters (73%) of the respondents reported that they would support SORN even if there were no scientific evidence showing that SORN actually reduces sex offending. The majority of respondents also believed they should have access to a large amount of information about sex offenders living in the community with the most agreed upon pieces of information being the name of the offender (95%), a photo of the offender (95%), the home address of the offender (85%), and the HIV/AIDS status of the offender (77%).

Using an Internet-based message board, Schiavone and Jeglic (2009) surveyed community members from 15 states on their perceptions of SORN. Among the respondents, there was a very strong belief in the fairness of SORN as the vast majority of the sample (91%) indicated that it was fair for community members to know where sex offenders reside. Almost two-thirds (65%) of the respondents agreed that their communities were safer because of SORN, however, less (54%) agreed that SORN helps to prevent offending.

In a telephone survey of Michigan residents, Comartin et al. (2009) questioned respondents on their support for various sex offender sanctions. Respondents indicated the greatest amount of support for various residence and work restrictions (being unable to work in a school or day care, being unable to work in other places children frequent, and being unable to live near a school or daycare), however, 85.6% of respondents agreed with notifying neighbors when a sex offender moves into the area and 83.5% of respondents agreed with publishing a sex offender's information online.

Only one study was identified that examined public beliefs about SORN while also differentiating between types of sex offenders. Kernsmith and colleagues (2009) surveyed Michigan residents about their levels of fear about seven types of sex offenders (incest offender, statutory rapist, juvenile sex offender, spousal

rapist, pedophile, date rapist, and an offender who committed a sex crime more than 10 years ago) and their agreement with the requirements of registration for these seven types of sex offenders. A majority of the respondents reported being fearful of all of the types of sex offenders residing in their neighborhoods except for statutory rapists, however, majorities of the respondents advocated for the registration of all seven types of sex offenders. Of the seven types of sex offenders, the respondents were the most fearful of pedophiles residing in their neighborhood (80.6%) and were the most supportive of registration for pedophiles (97.0%).

### *The Present Study*

In order to better understand how the public perceives SORN, the present study will examine public perceptions regarding the effectiveness of SORN in preventing sexual offenses, support for SORN, and agreement with potentially removing sex offenders from registries. To address the gap in the literature of failing to differentiate between types of sex offenders, the present study will gauge public perceptions on the above issues for sex offenders with adult victims as well as sex offenders with child victims. Additionally, the current research will seek to determine what, if any, factors influence public opinion toward SORN.

## **Methodology**

Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained to ensure the ethical integrity of the research plan. The data for this study originated from voluntary, confidential, electronic surveys, collected through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowdsourcing service that allows for the posting of various types of tasks that can be completed by individuals who register as "workers" in exchange for a reward determined by the poster of the task following the successful completion of the task. Those who post tasks have the ability to examine completed work and refuse payment to the worker if the completed work is subpar (for example, if the majority of a survey was submitted unanswered). A solicitation for U.S. residents at least 18 years of age to complete the survey was posted on MTurk for a reward of 25 cents. The solicitation linked potential respondents to the survey hosted on the web-based survey site SurveyMonkey. Through a screening question, potential participants were asked if they currently work in the field of criminal justice. Respondents who indicated they are employed in the field of criminal justice were disqualified from the survey.

## Participants

A total of 1,023 respondents participated in this study through MTurk. The demographic characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1. The sample was predominantly female (56.5%) and white (73.8%). Participants were most likely to be between 30 and 39 years old (34.4%) with slightly over one-quarter (26.1%) of the participants being between 18 and 29 years old. The sample was well-educated with 66.3% of the respondents having some form of a college degree. Over one-third (39.6%) reported a yearly household income of at least \$60,000. The respondents were most likely to be married (45.9%) and almost equally likely to be a parent (51.2%) or not be a parent (48.8%). The sample featured respondents from every U.S. state, except for Wyoming, but respondents were most likely to be from the South (39.4%). Politically, the respondents were most likely to consider themselves to be liberal or very liberal (44.6%).

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample**

	<b>% (n)</b>
<b>Sex (n=1,019)</b>	
Female	56.5 (576)
Male	43.5 (443)
<b>Age (n=1,023); M=38.7; SD=12.6</b>	
18-29	26.1 (267)
30-39	34.4 (352)
40-49	18.9 (193)
50-59	12.6 (129)
60-69	6.5 (66)
70+	1.6 (16)
<b>Race (n=1,021)</b>	
White	73.8 (753)
African American	8.9 (91)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.0 (10)
Asian or Pacific Islander	7.9 (81)
Hispanic or Latino	6.2 (63)
Other	2.3 (23)

	<b>% (n)</b>
<b>Education (n=1,018)</b>	
Less than high school	1.0 (10)
High school diploma or equivalent (GED)	8.6 (88)
Some college, but no degree	24.1 (245)
Associate degree	12.3 (125)
Bachelor's degree	37.8 (385)
Graduate or professional degree	16.2 (165)
<b>Income (n=1,019)</b>	
Less than \$10,000	4.6 (47)
\$10,001-\$19,999	9.1 (93)
\$20,000-\$39,999	23.1 (235)
\$40,000-\$59,999	23.6 (240)
\$60,000-\$79,999	26.2 (267)
Greater than \$80,000	13.4 (137)
<b>Marital Status (n=1,021)</b>	
Never married	40.0 (408)
Married	45.9 (469)
Separated	2.0 (20)
Divorced	10.0 (102)
Widowed	2.2 (22)
<b>Have Children (n=1,010)</b>	
No	48.8 (293)
Yes	51.2 (517)
<b>Region (n=1,022)</b>	
Northeast	17.8 (182)
Midwest	19.7 (201)
South	39.4 (403)
West	23.1 (236)

	<b>% (n)</b>
<b>Political Orientation (n=1,018)</b>	
Very conservative	6.1 (62)
Conservative	19.4 (197)
Moderate	30.0 (305)
Liberal	30.8 (314)
Very liberal	13.8 (140)

### *Data Collection Instrument*

The data collection instrument was developed to measure the attitudes of the general public toward SORN. Attitudes toward SORN were measured using a series of six statements that encompassed three topics. Specifically, the instrument contained items addressing belief that SORN reducing sexual victimization, support for SORN in the absence of evidence showing that SORN does effectively reduce sexual victimization, and support for removing sex offenders from registries based on good behavior. Half of the statements focused on the above issues for sex offenders with adult victims and the half of the statements focused on the above issues for sex offenders with child victims. For instance, respondents were provided the statements: "I believe that sex offender registration and notification is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of *adults*" and "I believe that sex offender registration and notification is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of *children*". Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neither agree nor disagree = 3, agree = 4, strongly agree = 5).

The respondents were also asked a series of demographic questions to be used as variables in multivariate analyses to determine what, if any, factors influence the perceptions of the respondents toward the above issues. The variables examined in the multivariate analyses included: sex (0 = female; 1 = male), race (0 = white; 1 = non-white), age, education (0 = less than high school; 1 = high school diploma or equivalent; 2 = some college, but no degree; 3 = associate degree; 4 = bachelor's degree; 5 = graduate degree), marital status (0 = not married; 1 = married), parental status (0 = is not a parent; 1 = is a parent), and political orientation (0 = very conservative; 1 = conservative; 2 = moderate; 3 = liberal; 4 = very liberal).

## Results

The descriptive results of the survey questions are presented in Table 2. Majorities of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that SORN is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of adults and children, however, there was a stronger belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing the sexual victimization of children (63.7% versus 51.7%). Majorities of the respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that they support SORN for both sex offenders with adult victims as well as sex offenders with child victims even if there is no scientific evidence showing that SORN reduces sexual victimization. As with the previous question, the respondents showed greater support for the policy when focused on offenders with child victims (80.0%) compared to adult victims (70.1%). There was little support among the sample for the removal of sex offenders from sex offender registries based on good behavior, but the sample was less in favor of the removal of sex offenders with child victims (12.7%) versus sex offenders with adult victims (20.0%).

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was conducted in order to examine the impact of multiple variables toward belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing sexual victimization of adults and children, support for SORN for sex offenders with adult victims and child victims, and support for the removal of sex offenders with adult victims from registries and sex offenders with child victims from registries based on good behavior. A review of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test and Q-Q plot suggests that the normality of the data was reasonable for OLS regression. Additionally, tests of the variance inflation factors (VIF) of predictors and the tolerance of predictor variables to see if the data met the assumption of collinearity indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern in any of the OLS analyses.

**Table 2. Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders by Victim Category**

	% (n)				
	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
I believe that sex offender registration and notification is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of <i>adults</i> .	4.3 (44)	22.7 (232)	21.3 (217)	40.5 (413)	11.2 (114)
I believe that sex offender registration and notification is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of <i>children</i> .	4.6 (47)	15.9 (162)	15.8 (161)	42.7 (436)	21 (214)
I support sex offender registration and notification for sex offenders with <i>adult</i> victims even if there is no scientific evidence showing that these policies reduce sexual victimization.	3.2 (33)	11.5 (117)	15.1 (154)	40.3 (410)	29.8 (303)
I support sex offender registration and notification for sex offenders with <i>child</i> victims even if there is no scientific evidence showing that these policies reduce sexual victimization.	2.7 (28)	7.1 (72)	10.2 (357)	35 (357)	45 (459)
Sex offenders with <i>adult</i> victims should be able to be removed from the sex offender registry based on good behavior.	25.6 (260)	29.3 (298)	20.6 (210)	19.5 (198)	5 (51)
Sex offenders with <i>child</i> victims should be able to be removed from the sex offender registry based on good behavior.	55.3 (562)	22.2 (226)	9.7 (99)	9.1 (93)	3.6 (37)

The results of the multivariate analyses for belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing sexual victimization are provided in Table 3. A significant regression equation was found  $F(7, 981) = 6.20, p < .000$ , with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .04, for the model measuring belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing the sexual

victimization of adults and a significant regression equation was also found  $F(7, 981) = 1.94, p < .05$ ), with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .01, for the model measuring belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing the sexual victimization of children. Race was a statistically significant predictor for both victim types as non-white respondents were more likely to believe that SORN is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of adults ( $\beta = .15, p < .001$ ) as well as children ( $\beta = .08, p < .01$ ). Race was the only statistically significant variable shown to influence belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing the sexual victimization of children, however, age and political orientation were also shown to be significant predictors of belief in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing the sexual victimization of adults. Specifically, older respondents ( $\beta = -.09, p < .001$ ) and more politically liberal respondents ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ) were less likely to believe in the effectiveness of SORN in preventing the sexual victimization of adults.

**Table 3. OLS regression of belief in the effectiveness of SORN by victim type**

<i>Variable</i>	<b>Adult Victim</b>		<b>Child Victim</b>	
	<i>b(SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>b(SE)</i>	$\beta$
Sex	.08(.07)	.04	-.01(.07)	-.00
Race	.37(.08)	.15***	.20(.08)	.08**
Age	-.01(.00)	-.09**	-.00(.00)	-.01
Education	.03(.03)	.03	.01(.03)	.01
Marital Status	-.02(.04)	-.02	-.05(.04)	-.05
Parental Status	.10(.08)	-.05	-.06(.08)	-.03
Political Orientation	-.07(.03)	-.07*	-.03(.03)	-.03
Constant	3.52(.16)		3.72 (.17)	

\*.05; \*\*.01; \*\*\*.001. Otherwise, not statistically significant.

The results of the multivariate analyses for support for SORN in the absence of evidence showing that it is effective in reducing sexual victimization are presented in Table 4. A significant regression equation was found  $F(7, 978) = 8.07, p < .000$ ), with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .05, for the model measuring support for SORN for sex offenders with adult victims and a significant regression equation was also found  $F(7, 981) = 10.17, p < .000$ ), with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .06, for the model measuring support for SORN for sex offenders with child victims. Sex, parental status, and

political orientation were statistically significant predictor variables for both victim types.

In regard to sex, female respondents were significantly more likely than male respondents to support SORN in the absence of evidence showing that it is effective in reducing sexual victimization of adults ( $\beta = -.17, p < .001$ ) as well as children ( $\beta = -.20, p < .001$ ). Concerning parental status, respondents who identified as parents were significantly more likely than respondents not identifying as parents to support SORN in the absence of evidence showing that it is effective in reducing sexual victimization of adults ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ) as well as children ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ). With respect to political orientation, more politically conservative respondents had a greater likelihood of supporting SORN in the absence of evidence showing that it is effective in reducing the sexual victimization of both adults ( $\beta = -.09, p < .001$ ) and children ( $\beta = -.09, p < .001$ ) compared to more politically liberal respondents. Race was found to be a significant predictor as well, but only for child victims as white respondents were significantly more likely to support SORN in the absence of evidence showing that it is effective in reducing the sexual victimization of children ( $\beta = -.06, p < .05$ ) than non-white respondents.

**Table 4. OLS regression of support for SORN by victim type**

Variable	Adult Victim		Child Victim	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	$\beta$	<i>b</i> (SE)	$\beta$
Sex	-.37(.07)	-.17***	-.39(.07)	-.20***
Race	.04(.08)	.01	-.15(.07)	-.06*
Age	-.00(.00)	-.02	.00(.00)	.02
Education	-.01(.03)	-.01	-.01(.03)	-.01
Marital Status	-.07(.04)	-.07	-.06(.04)	-.06
Parental Status	.25(.08)	.12***	.24(.07)	.12***
Political Orientation	-.09(.03)	-.09***	-.09(.03)	-.09***
Constant	4.24(.16)		4.43(.15)	

\*.05; \*\*.01; \*\*\*.001. Otherwise, not statistically significant.

The results of the multivariate analyses for the removal of sex offenders from sex offender registries based on good behavior are provided in Table 5. A significant regression equation was found  $F(7, 978) = 10.22, p < .000$ , with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .06, for the model measuring support for the removal of sex

offenders with adult victims from sex offender registries based on good behavior and a significant regression equation was also found  $F(7, 978) = 9.28, p < .000$ , with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .06, for the model measuring support for the removal of sex offenders with child victims from sex offender registries based on good behavior. Sex was found to be a statistically significant predictor of support for both victim types as male respondents were significantly more likely to support the removal of sex offenders with adult victims ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) as well as the removal of sex offenders with child victims ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ) from sex offender registries based on good behavior compared to female respondents. Education was also a statistically significant predictor, but only for the child victim category as respondents with higher levels of educational attainment were more likely to support the removal of sex offenders with child victims ( $\beta = .08, p < .001$ ) based on good behavior compared to respondents with lower levels of educational attainment.

**Table 5: OLS regression of support for removal from registry by victim type**

<i>Variable</i>	<b>Adult Victim</b>		<b>Child Victim</b>	
	<i>b(SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>b(SE)</i>	$\beta$
Sex	.59(.08)	.24***	.52(.07)	.22***
Race	-.01(.09)	-.00	.13(.08)	.05
Age	.00(.00)	.03	-.00(.00)	-.03
Education	.05(.03)	.06	.07(.03)	.08***
Marital Status	.04(.04)	.03	.03(.04)	.03
Parental Status	-.07(.09)	-.03	.03(.08)	.01
Political Orientation	-.02(.03)	-.02	-.02(.03)	-.02
Constant	1.99(.18)		1.45(.17)	

\*.05; \*\*.01; \*\*\*.001. Otherwise, not statistically significant.

## Discussion

The results of the present study advance the literature on perceptions of SORN in four important ways. First, a majority of the public believes that SORN is effective in preventing sexual victimization, however, the public believes that SORN is more effective in preventing the sexual victimization of children than adults. Second, a majority of the public supports SORN in the absence of any evidence that actually shows the policy is effective in preventing sexual victimization, however, the public is more supportive of SORN for sex offenders with child victims than sex offenders

with adult victims. Third, a majority of the public disagreed that sex offenders should be able to be removed from registries based on good behavior, however, the public disagreed more strongly with the removal of sex offenders with child victims from registries based on good behavior than sex offender with adult victims. Finally, several variables significantly influenced the respondents' belief in the effectiveness of SORN, support for SORN, and attitudes toward the removal of sex offenders from registries depending upon the sex offender's choice in victim.

Overall, the public holds punitive views toward sex offenders regardless of whether they are sex offenders who victimize adults or sex offenders who victimize children: They think SORN prevents sexual victimization, they support SORN whether it actually does prevent sexual victimization or not, and they do not want sex offenders removed from registries. That said, the public does view sex offenders who victimize children more harshly than sex offenders who victimize adults and support SORN more for sex offenders with child victims than sex offenders with adult victims. This finding is not surprising as multiple scholars have attributed the passage of SORN to moral panics surrounding the sexual victimization of children (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Maguire & Singer, 2011; Zgoba, 2004). The two federal policies that provided the foundation for SORN (the previously discussed Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan's Law) are named after children who were victimized by sex offenders.

SORN may have been implemented to quell public fear about the sexual victimization of children, however, SORN has been practiced for over 20 years at this point without a demonstrated effect on reducing sexual victimization of children or adults (Zgoba et al., 2018). Although the evidence points to SORN being ineffective, the public believes it is effective. In the present study, almost two-thirds (63.7%) of the respondents believe that SORN is effective in preventing the sexual victimization of children (51.7% agreeing the same for adults). The public's fear of sex offenders may have driven the passage of SORN and it appears that their fear, misunderstanding of the effectiveness of the policy, or both has allowed for the continuation and strengthening of SORN. In interviews with state-level policy-makers who sponsored and passed at least one sex offender bill in their state, Meloy, Curtis, and Boatwright (2013) found that almost 90% of the policy-makers believed that the sex offender laws in their states had at least one major flaw with the most common being that the laws were too broad. The policy-makers also largely believed that SORN is necessary for public protection, but supporting SORN and other sex offender laws were also seen as crucial for a successful political career.

This is problematic as multiple scholars have called for reforms to SORN (Applebaum, 2008; Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Levenson, 2018; Levenson, Grady, & Leibowitz, 2016), but fixing flawed criminal justice policies can be misconstrued by the public as being “soft” on crime or more sympathetic to offenders than to victims. Policy-makers may be hesitant to make any changes to SORN, even if backed by evidence, for fear of a negative effect on their political careers. The results of the present study provide a possible avenue for reforms. The public holds a greater endorsement for SORN when it is aimed at sex offenders with child victims and, thus, may be more amenable to changes to SORN if those changes focused on sex offenders with adult victims. For instance, among several recommended policy changes to SORN, Levenson and colleagues (2016) suggested the implementation of mechanisms for registered sex offender to petition for removal from registration after a certain period of time. Support for removal from registries based on good behavior for sex offenders with both adult victims and child victims was gauged among the respondents in the present study. Overall, the respondents were not supportive of either group of sex offenders having the ability to be removed from registries, however, the respondents disagreed less with the removal of sex offenders with adult victims (54.9%) from registries than the removal of sex offenders with child victims (77.5%) from registries based on good behavior.

A variety of factors were found to significantly influence the public’s perceptions of SORN, including the respondents’ sex, race, age, educational attainment, parental status, and political leanings. It should be noted that marital status was demonstrated not to significantly influence the public’s perceptions of SORN. Additionally, none of the variables were significant across every model. Sex was a significant predictor of support for SORN for both sex offenders with adult victims and child victims as well as a significant predictor of support for the removal of sex offenders with adult victims as well as the removal of sex offenders with child victims from registries based upon good behavior. The female respondents in the present study were more likely to support SORN (for both victim types) compared to male respondents and were less likely to endorse the removal of sex offenders from registries based upon good behavior (for both victim types). This finding is not surprising as women have consistently reported higher levels of fear related to crime than men (Cops & Pleysier, 2011). When it comes to sexual victimization, specifically, Warr (1987) asserts that women associate crime with the risk of sexual victimization, which influences that heightened fear of crime. This may provide an explanation as to why women in the present study were more likely to support SORN for sex offenders of both victim types in the absence of evidence showing that SORN is actually effective as well as having less support for the removal of sex

offenders, regardless of victim type, from registries. Parental status was also found to significantly influence support for SORN, with parents more likely to endorse the policy for sex offenders with adult victims as well as sex offenders with child victims compared to non-parents. This finding is also not surprising since, as discussed earlier, SORN was passed to alleviate concerns over the sexual victimization of children, however, parents were not any more likely to believe in the effectiveness of SORN or disapprove of the removal of sex offenders from registries based on good behavior.

This study is not without limitations. The purpose of the study was to examine public perceptions of SORN while differentiating between different types of sex offenders. This was accomplished by separating sex offenders into two groups: sex offenders with adult victims and sex offenders with child victims. This approach, while better than treating this offending population as one group, still does not capture the full scope of the sex offender population and thus only provides a limited understanding of public perceptions of SORN. For instance, among sex offenders with children, the public may feel differently about SORN if the offender victimized a child known to the offender (such as a family member) versus a child who was a stranger. The public may also feel differently about SORN if the offender physically assaulted a child versus viewed child pornography. Future research should continue to examine public perceptions of SORN while further differentiating between types of sex offenders who would be subject to SORN.

A reasonable set of concerns also exists over the use of an opt-in respondent source such as MTurk in regards to the quality of the data provided by the respondents and the representativeness of the samples generated. Consistently, MTurk has been shown to produce reliable data that does not significantly differ from data produced by more traditional methods (Bartneck, Duenser, Molchanova, & Zawieska, 2015; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013) as well as samples that are more diverse than those derived from standard Internet samples and college samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Casler et al., 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Acknowledging its limitations, the present study fills a gap in the literature on perceptions of SORN. Sex offenders have been treated as a homogenous group in policy decisions, like SORN, despite differences in the characteristics and offenses of this population. Results of the present study indicate that while the general public holds largely positive views toward SORN, differences can be found when

comparing the public's perceptions of SORN as it relates to sex offenders with adult victims and sex offenders with child victims. The public believes that SORN is more effective for sex offenders with child victims, the public supports SORN more strongly for sex offenders with child victims, and the public disagrees more strongly with the removal of sex offenders with child victims from registries. Despite evidence that SORN is ineffective, policy-makers are unlikely to make any sweeping reforms to SORN and the public are unlikely to welcome any changes with open arms, but the results of the present study do indicate that the public may be more receptive to changes to SORN that focus on sex offenders with adult victims.

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## About the Author

**Corey Call** received his Ph.D. in public policy and administration from Virginia Commonwealth University. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice Studies at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. His primary research interests concern sex offending, sex offender management policies, serial murder, and media portrayals of crime and justice. E-mail: callcp@longwood.edu