

Moral Panics and Community Member Perceptions Regarding Reductions in Sex Offender Recidivism



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Abstract

The occurrence of a moral panic traditionally flashes and fades away once the threat is perceived to be contained. As it relates to registered sex offenders, researchers suggest that the panic is more perpetual in nature rather than a temporary style of panic. This continuation of the panic leads community members to support legislative efforts, such as the expansion of sex offender registration and notification (SORN) laws, designed to contain the threat that sex offenders pose. This study uses a sample of 877 community members to examine whether the elements of a moral panic are able to predict participant perceptions of the sex offender registry's promoted efficacy in reducing sex offender recidivism. Using an ordinary least squares regression analytical approach, the findings suggest that the elements of a moral panic, being used as theoretical predictors, significantly predict community member perceptions of the registry's effectiveness in reducing sex offender recidivism. Policy implications of these findings will also be discussed.

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Introduction

Sex offenders are perceived to pose a threat to the safety of citizens – specifically children. Simply viewed as a group of offenders who are likely to rape and abduct children (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), community members believe that extensive efforts must be taken to curb sex offender recidivism. Since the early 1990s, state and federal legislators have taken efforts to establish and expand sex offender registration and community notification (SORN) laws that would work to supervise registered sex offenders living in the community post-conviction. While community members support these efforts, research suggests that these same individuals are not fully knowledgeable about the realities regarding the legislative efforts they support (Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun, & Kernsmith, 2009).

SORN laws were implemented as a way to improve public safety while monitoring sex offenders post-conviction, which would in turn deter sex offenders from recidivating (Matson & Lieb, 1996). As sex offender recidivism has not been eliminated through these efforts there have been renewed calls for amplified legislation, which creates an increasingly controlled and restricted environment for registered sex offenders (Burchfield, Sample, & Lytle, 2014). Although some legislators have acknowledged that SORN laws are ineffective (Meloy, Curtis, & Boarwright, 2013), they are continuously supported by the majority of legislators and community members alike, due in part, to the high amount of community fear that must be assuaged. High levels of fear and hastily passed legislation are indicative that a moral panic may be occurring in relation to a targeted group, like registered sex offenders (Cohen, 1972; 2002).

As developed and explained by Cohen (1972; 2002), moral panics develop when there is a targeted group – such as registered sex offenders – that are feared by community members, and who can be identified as the “folk devil.” In the original conceptualization of moral panic, the phenomenon is described as being brief in nature; after an initial flash, the panic fades away. However, the moral panic associated with registered sex offenders has not faded. This study examines the moral panic associated with registered sex offenders through the lens of a perpetual panic as described by Burchfield, Sample and Lytle (2014). As the current panic does not flash and fade like a traditional moral panic, the panic consistently renews itself leaving community members fearful of the perceived threat that registered sex offenders pose. This study analyzes community member perspectives regarding the sex offender registry’s efficacy in reducing sex offender recidivism levels through the lens of the perpetual moral panic.

Background

In a series of memorial laws (Surrette, 2011), SORN legislation was established through the passage of The Jacob Wetterling Act (1994) which established standards for states to register sex offenders. The subsequent addendum of Megan's Law (1996) eradicated the ambiguities found in the Wetterling Act regarding community notification strategies. As part of those community notification efforts, the offender's personal information such as their name, age, address, other demographic and offense information became publicly available.

Following the implementation of Megan's Law, the passage of the Adam Walsh Act (2006) heavily expanded the initial legislative efforts of the states, and implemented new guidelines that created a standard of sex offender registration and notification across the country, otherwise known as the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA). SORNA served to correct inconsistencies among states, and new expansions required some individuals to register when they had not been previously required to do so. This requirement overly inflated the number of individuals on the registry, making it appear as though there was an increase in sexual crime rates (Mancini, 2013). Although SORN legislation has continuously been passed at the state and federal level to supervise registered sex offenders as a community safety effort, there is concern that community members are not accessing the materials that they so strongly advocate for.

Community Member Perceptions of Registered Sex Offenders

The memorial laws of SORN legislation were part of an emotional response associated with legal efforts to curtail sex offender recidivism (Klein, 2015; Sample & Kadleck, 2008), but are rather symbolic in nature (Sample, Evans, & Anderson, 2011). Community members strongly support SORN legislation efforts (Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; Koon-Magnin, 2015). Although they support this legislation, researchers have found that community members do not frequently access the SORN tools available to them, such as accessing the state registry websites (Burchfield & Mingus, 2012; Craun, 2010; Kernsmith, Comarin, Craun, & Kernsmith, 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, et al., 2009). Additionally, community members are often unknowledgeable about the realities of the legislation they support (Klein, 2015). Community members frequently call for harsher penalties against registered sex offenders, including harsher prison sentences (Roberts, Stalans, Indermaur, & Hough, 2003) and longer registration periods (Lam, Mitchell, & Seto, 2010; Mears, Mancini, Gertz, & Bratton, 2008).

Despite the disjunct between frequency of access and support for SORN legislation, community members feel as though these programs are useful because of their beliefs regarding sex offender myths. For example, common myths suggest sex offenders are chronic recidivists (Mancini & Mears, 2010), who cannot be rehabilitated (Sundt, Cullen, Applegate, & Turner, 1998). The continued perpetuation of these myths helps aid in the emotional panic associated with registered sex offenders. As the panic continues to grow, so do calls for further legislation surrounding the control of these offenders post-conviction. This cyclical pattern is the earmark of Cohen's moral panic (1972; 2002) and is at the crux of the current study.

Registered Sex Offenders and Moral Panic

Cohen's (1972; 2002) development of a moral panic focuses on the emotional response of community members as they encounter a group, identified as the "folk devil," whose behavior does not conform with group norms or who poses a large threat to the fabric of society. Folk devils are portrayed as deviant through means of extreme media attention (Jenkins, 2004) and stigmatization; sex offenders are a prime example of the modern-day folk devil (Cohen, 1972; 2002). The pursuit of the correction of the folk devil's behavior can lead to haphazard or knee-jerk legislative solutions (Cohen, 2011; Sample et al., 2011). The frequent media reporting focused on a specific topic can influence public reaction which can include a sense of heightened emotion, anxiety, and hostility toward the target group (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

The elements of a moral panic

A true moral panic is described as having five key elements which help to ignite a fervor within the public; concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). First, a moral panic must have a heightened level of concern. This indicates that community members are aware of the threat, but this element cannot be equated with fear, as fear suggests that the threat is imminent (Best, 1990). Concern is best measured through the use of public opinion polls, media attention, and proposed legislation (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Concern is often a cyclical occurrence; as more attention is focused on sex offender related issues, concern becomes more prevalent which advances the efforts taken to curtail the perceived threat that registered sex offenders pose (Authors, In Press).

Next, a moral panic will include hostility which suggests that there is a high level of anger directed toward the folk devil and their threatening behavior. In a moral panic, society would label a deviant group as the "enemy" and become exceedingly

antagonistic toward the specific group because they are damaging the fabric of society (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jenkins, 2004; Tolson & Klein, 2015). A moral panic should also have consensus, or agreement, within a large portion of society that is being affected by the folk devil. The large amount of media attention focused on the topic could illustrate consensus within the effected group regarding the panic focused on registered sex offenders (Burchfield et al., 2014; Fox, 2013). There must also be disproportionality within a moral panic, which means that the reaction toward the issues is vastly exaggerated compared to the actual threat that the community is being subjected to (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). These reactions, such as SORN legislation, are often emotional in response and are put together in a haphazard format without any evaluation completed in terms of efficacy (Sample et al., 2011). Finally, moral panics include volatility, meaning the panic can erupt rapidly, and without notice at any given time. Moral panics may also subside just as quickly as they started. However, many moral panics will erupt with such ferocity that it will cause immediate media attention, legislative changes, and informal punishments against the target group (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994); this type of panic is perpetual in nature in regard to registered sex offenders and volatility is characterized by short temporal bursts rather than one brilliant explosion of emotion.

Perpetual moral panic

Traditional research focused on moral panics sets out to determine whether a moral panic is actually occurring in relation to a specific folk devil group or targeted behavior (Burchfield et al., 2014; Fox, 2013; Jenkins, 2004; Lytle, 2016). Research conducted by Burchfield and colleagues (2014) assumed that the panic was already occurring and instead sought to determine why the panic was not fading like other moral panics. They suggest that the media plays a large role in the perpetuation of the panic, as the amount of coverage focused on sex offender related issues remained constant before and after the passage of the Adam Walsh Act in 2006 (Burchfield et al., 2014). As the panic is consistent, and routinely drives our emotional reactions forward, this may have an impact on why community members routinely call for increased legislation to curtail the threat that sex offenders pose. Prior research also suggests that the perpetual panic is linked to increased calls for punitive legislation against sex offenders as current SORN efforts are perceived to not be strict enough (Authors, In Press).

Building on the findings of Burchfield and colleagues (2014) and our own prior research (Authors, In Press), the current study does not seek to establish whether the panic is occurring. Instead, this study seeks to understand participant

perceptions regarding the efficacy of the registry system on sex offender recidivism levels within the framework of the perpetual panic.

Current Study

As it has been established that the panic surrounding sex offenders is perpetual in nature rather than a flash panic, theoretically the perpetual panic that community members are experiencing would drive support for the continued use of SORN legislative efforts. This study uses the elements of a moral panic to predict the dependent variable of community member perceptions regarding the sex offender registry's effectiveness in reducing recidivism. Therefore, this study poses two research questions: 1) Are the elements of a moral panic able to predict participants' perceptions regarding the registry's efficacy in reducing recidivism? and 2) Given that there are additional registry related variables in the model, what are the strongest predictor variables overall?

Methodology

Sample

This study utilized a convenience sample of community members recruited across the United States, through the use of an online participant pool, or marketplace, Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is administered through Amazon.com and provides an online forum through which researchers can provide incentives to participants to complete surveys or other types of work. MTurk allows participants to opt into the survey, provided that they are 18-years of age and had an internet protocol address located in the United States. Participants were recruited through an advertisement posted on the MTurk forum and were offered a \$1 incentive (redeemable at Amazon.com) to complete an online survey which took between 15-30 minutes to complete. MTurk allows for the protection of subjects and keeps their identities anonymous as Amazon serves as a third-party between the participant and researcher for payment purposes. Collecting data from the MTurk platform has been shown to be a reliable source of data collection (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013; Parolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). An external link was provided in the advertisement for participants to take the survey through Qualtrics Research Suite™, which allowed the researcher to prohibit the participants from taking the survey more than once and providing duplicate responses. Qualtrics also prevented those without a United States internet protocol address from taking the survey. Participants were required to complete an informed consent form before completing the survey; the survey included a variety of questions addressing participant perceptions of sex offenders and of their state's sex offender registry.

Participants were able to self-select into the survey during its availability in October 2013. Due to this self-selection, response rates for this survey are unknown. However, 877 participants completed surveys and resided in all fifty-states across the country, with each state being represented by at least three participants. As the authors acknowledge that three participants do not represent an acceptable sample size per state, we were unable to control for geographic location based on state. Instead, geographic location was controlled for in this study by region with the highest concentration of individuals reportedly living in the south ($n=316$, 36%), which serves as the reference group for the analysis. Participants commonly reported being male ($n=465$, 53.0%), White ($n=521$, 59.4%), between 30-34 years of age (median age group), and non-Hispanic ($n=781$, 89.1%). The majority of participants did not have children ($n=491$, 56.0%), but did have at minimum a Bachelor's degree ($n=520$, 59.3%), and lived in areas with populations larger than 50,000 residents ($n=639$, collectively 72.9%). These demographics will serve as control variables for the regression analysis used in this article, and a full univariate analysis of these measures can be found in *Table 1*.

Table 1 Univariate Statistics for Control Measures ($n = 877$)

Variable	Percentages
Parental Status	Non-Parent $n = 491$ (56.0%)
	Parent $n = 386$ (44.0%)
Race	Non-White $n = 356$ (41.6%)
	White $n = 521$ (59.4%)
Age	Median Age Group 30-34 years old
Ethnicity	Not Hispanic $n = 781$ (89.1%)
	Hispanic $n = 96$ (10.9%)
Highest Level of Education	No College Degree $n = 357$ (40.7%)
	Bachelor's Degree or Higher $n = 520$ (59.3%)
Geographic Region	Area other than the South $n = 561$ (64.0%)
	South $n = 316$ (36.0%)
Population Size	Less than 50,000 people $n = 238$ (27.1%)
	50,000 – 99,999 $n = 245$ (27.9%)
	100,000 – 249,999 $n = 210$ (23.9%)
	250,000 – 999,999 $n = 100$ (11.4%)
	1,000,000 or more $n = 84$ (9.6%)

Education level was included in this study as participants identified that they have a Bachelor's Degree with the highest frequency over other education levels. The decision was made to dichotomize the response options to indicate a divide in

formal education levels based on the completion of a four-year degree. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of education tend to be less punitive in their attitudes toward offenders (Dowler, 2003). Population size was included in the study due to higher concentrations of sex offenders found in more populated areas (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2006), thus indicating that participants may feel more negatively toward sex offenders if they are living in areas with higher populations. Multicollinearity concerns existed between gender and parental status, therefore, the decision was made to exclude parental status from the final analysis. No other multicollinearity issues existed between the control variables, or between the control variables and the independent variables; all VIF levels were below 1.5 for these variables.

Measures

Independent Variables

Registry Support, Strictness, and Prior Searches. In addition to the control variables, participants were asked several questions about their attitudes, beliefs and knowledge regarding the sex offender registry and registered sex offenders. First, participants were asked about their current support for the registry with the following measure: “Do you support the use of your state’s publicly available sex offender registry system in its current form?” Response options were measured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from “definitely not” (1) to “definitely yes” (4). Most participants reported that “definitely yes,” they support their state’s registry system in its current form (46.9%).

Second, participants were asked about their perceived level of registry strictness, by asking “How strict do you think the current laws are concerning your state’s sex offender registry system?” A five-point Likert scale was used to measure responses, ranging from “way too strict” (1) to “way too lax” (5). Most frequently, participants reported that they felt the strictness of the current laws are “just right” (40.3%).

Next, participants were asked about their experiences searching for registered sex offenders online, by asking “How many times have you searched your state’s sex offender registry website for sex offenders living in the areas nearby your home?” Response options were originally measured on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 0 times (0) to 4 or more times (5). Due to a severe lack of normality in response variability, these response options were collapsed creating a dichotomous variable consisting of 0 times (0) and 1 or more times (1). Despite the reported support for the registry system, there was a nearly even split as to whether participants actually searched for sex offenders in their area. Most frequently,

participants reported that they had never searched their state’s sex offender registry website to look for sex offenders living in the areas nearby their homes (51.2%).

Finally, participants were asked to estimate how many sex offenders lived in their communities. This was done by asking, “How many sex offenders would you estimate are living nearby your home? Responses options ranged from 0-5 sex offenders (1) to 20 or more sex offenders (5). Participants most frequently reported that they believed 0-5 sex offenders lived nearby their homes (n=603, 68.8%).

Table 2 Registry Knowledge measures (n=877).

Measure	Very True (1)	Somewhat True (2)	Unsure (3)	Somewhat False (4)	Very False (5)
1) In my state, all sex offenders are classified the same, no matter their crime.* (False)	n = 87 (9.9%)	n = 215 (24.5%)	n = 370 (42.2%)	n = 135 (15.4%)	n = 70 (8.0%)
2) In some states, registered sex offenders are required to live at least 1,000 feet from a school zone, park or bus stop. (True)	n = 196 (22.3%)	n = 259 (29.5%)	n = 330 (37.6%)	n = 60 (6.8%)	n = 32 (3.6%)
3) Some sex offenders are required to register for life. (True)	n = 369 (42.1%)	n = 222 (25.3%)	n = 218 (24.9%)	n = 48 (5.5%)	n = 20 (2.3%)
4) In some states, juvenile offenders who are at least 14 years old at the time of the offense, can be placed on the registry if convicted. (True)	n = 120 (13.7%)	n = 189 (21.6%)	n = 473 (53.9%)	n = 73 (8.3%)	n = 22 (2.5%)
5) All sex offenders are required to be on some sort of electronic monitoring/GPS tracking device at all times.* (False)	n = 64 (7.3%)	n = 93 (10.6%)	n = 261 (29.8%)	n = 221 (25.2%)	n = 238 (27.1%)
6) Sex offenders have very high rates of reoffending.* (False)	n = 213 (24.3%)	n = 325 (37.1%)	n = 230 (26.2%)	n = 68 (7.8%)	n = 41 (4.7%)
7) The Amber Alert system is named after a child named Amber; it has nothing to do with the color amber. (True)	n = 436 (49.7%)	n = 135 (15.4%)	n = 229 (26.1%)	n = 43 (4.9%)	n = 34 (3.9%)
8) There are more male sex offenders registered than female sex offenders. (True)	n = 416 (47.4%)	n = 236 (26.9%)	n = 164 (18.7%)	n = 49 (5.6%)	n = 12 (1.4%)
9) Individuals convicted of their very first sexual crime can be classified as sexual predators or can be placed in a Tier III classification. (True)	n = 140 (16.0%)	n = 223 (25.4%)	n = 451 (51.4%)	n = 47 (5.4%)	n = 16 (1.8%)
10) After serving their prison sentences, some states allow sex offenders to be incarcerated indefinitely though a process called Civil Commitment. (True)	n = 87 (9.9%)	n = 143 (16.3%)	n = 524 (59.7%)	n = 91 (10.4%)	n = 32 (3.6%)

* Indicates that the measure was reverse coded.

Registry Knowledge Variable. Prior literature has suggested that lay community members are not highly knowledgeable about issues surrounding sexual offenders (Klein, 2015). This study incorporates a count variable measuring participants’

general knowledge surrounding SORN laws. Participants were asked to respond to ten general items that were used to measure registry knowledge in a general sense, with all items using a five-point Likert Scale with response options ranging from Very True (1) to Very False (5). Some examples of the items included are, "In most states... All sex offenders are classified the same no matter what their crime," and "Juvenile sex offenders, who are at least 14 years at the time of the offense, can be placed on the registry if convicted." *Table 2* shows the full operationalization and the univariate statistics for the ten measures that comprise the registry knowledge variable.

The response options were originally measured on a five-point Likert scale, however due to a lack of normality in the distribution of responses for many of the measures, all ten items were dichotomized into correct and incorrect response options. For the true statements, the "Very True" and "Somewhat True" statements were collapsed and coded as being correct. The remaining three categories, "Unsure," "Somewhat False," and "Very False," were coded as being incorrect. The reverse action was taken if the measure was a false statement, with the "Unsure" option being included in the incorrect answer response. Next, the ten items were transformed into a count variable, with scores ranging from 0 (no registry knowledge measures were answered correctly) to 10 (all ten registry knowledge items were answered correctly). The mean score for this count variable was 4.50, indicating that most participants do not have a very accurate knowledge base, and answered more than half of the measures incorrectly.

Stereotypical Sex Offender Variable. The final independent variable used for this study centers around the public portrayal of sex offenders and who the general public believes them to be. This independent variable measures participants' ability to identify the most common demographic characteristics of sex offenders listed on the registry. These characteristics were based on data analyzed by Ackerman and colleagues (2011), which suggested that the most frequent type of registered sex offender is a White, non-Hispanic male, with a mean age of 44.3 years of age. The most common offense committed was a physical, non-consensual sex act against a minor between the ages of 6-14. This variable was used in order to identify whether participants were able to correctly identify the demographic information surrounding those on the registry, and who was identifying stereotypical information regarding this offender group.

Subsequently participants were asked to identify the common demographic features of sex offenders including the gender, age group, race, ethnicity, offender/victim relationship, victim type, and type of crime or victimization as per

the Ackerman et al. study (2011). Participants were the most successful in correctly identifying the gender, race, and ethnicity of the offender.

These seven items were all dichotomized into “correct” and “incorrect” response options, similar to the method used to dichotomize the registry knowledge measures. Indexing the seven variables then created a new measure with participant scores ranging from 0 (no correct responses were identified) to 7 (all seven correct responses were identified). The mean score for the Stereotypical Sex Offender count variable was 4.55; this indicates that participants have a semi-accurate knowledge base regarding the most frequent demographic features of sex offenders and answered more than half of the measures correctly. *Table 3* shows the univariate statistics for the measures included in the stereotypical sex offender variable.

Table 3 Frequency Statistics for Stereotypical Sex Offender Measures (n = 877).

Measure	Response Options	Frequencies	
Gender	Male	n = 834	(95.1%)
	Female	n = 43	(4.9%)
Age Group	14-25 years old	n = 54	6.2%
	26-35 years old	n = 406	46.3%
	36-45 years old	n = 303	34.5%
	46-55 years old	n = 101	11.5%
	56-65 years old	n = 11	1.3%
	66 years old and older	n = 2	0.2%
Race	Native American/Alaskan	n = 45	5.1%
	Asian	n = 76	8.7%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	n = 21	2.4%
	Black/African American	n = 81	9.2%
	White	n = 627	71.5%
	Other	n = 27	3.1%
Ethnicity	Hispanic	n = 163	18.6%
	Non-Hispanic	n = 714	81.4%
Offender/Victim Relationship	Offender is a stranger	n = 285	32.5%
	Offender is a close friend	n = 257	29.3%
	Offender is a distant relative	n = 245	27.9%
	Offender is an immediate relative	n = 90	10.3%
Most Frequent Victim	Pre-pubescent female minor	n = 361	41.2%
	Pre-pubescent male minor	n = 163	18.6%
	Post-pubescent female minor	n = 203	23.1%
	Post-pubescent male minor	n = 19	2.2%
	Adult female	n = 95	10.8%
Most Frequent Victimization	Adult male	n = 36	4.1%
	Physical non-consensual sex act	n = 560	63.9%
	Physical consensual sex act with a minor	n = 228	26.0%
	Non-physical sex act	n = 89	10.1%

Moral Panic Variables. Based on the original moral panics literature (Cohen, 1972, 2002) and subsequent developments (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), this work incorporates the five elements of a moral panic (concern, hostility, consensus, volatility, and disproportionality) to predict participant support for the sex offender registry.

To measure the five elements of a moral panic, original variables were created for this study and have not been used in other research outside of this data set before. Instead of focusing on moral panic as a dependent variable, this work incorporates the five elements as theoretical predictors, as prior research has already established that a perpetual panic is occurring in relation to registered sex offenders (Burchfield et al., 2014). Confirmatory factor analysis was completed to determine factor loadings for the moral panic subscales. Additional information for each subscale and the operationalization of each element of a moral panic are included below. A full factor analysis of the subscales is located in the appendix of the paper.

Five items were used to create the *concern* scale; 1) Are you worried about sex offenders living nearby your home? 2) Are you worried that children in your community (your own children, or children in general) may be at risk of becoming the victim of a sexual offense? 3) Are you worried that you personally may become the victim of a sexual offense? 4) Are you worried about children in your community (your own children, or children in general) being approached by a sexual offender? 5) Are you worried that as sex offenders continue to live in the community, then more sex offenses will occur? All five items were measured on a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from “definitely not” (1) “to definitely yes” (4). Factor analysis confirmed that all five items loaded onto the same factor at .794 or higher, and reliability analysis confirmed that the multi-item, averaged, scale was reliable and appropriate to use in the models (Cronbach’s alpha = .841).

Five items were also used to create the *hostility* scale; 1) Are you angry that sex offenders are allowed to live in the community? 2) Do you feel any resentment over the fact that some of your neighbors may be sex offenders? 3) Do you feel any anger toward the criminal justice system for releasing sex offenders from jails and prisons? 4) Are you angry that sex offenders may be working at businesses where you may frequently shop or visit? 5) Are you angry that children in your community (your own children, or children in general) might come into contact with sex offenders? All five items were measured on a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from “definitely not” (1) “to definitely yes” (4). Factor analysis confirmed that all five items loaded onto the same factor at .782 or higher, and

reliability analysis confirmed that the multi-item, averaged, scale was reliable and appropriate to use in the models (Cronbach's alpha = .915).

Five items were also used to create the *consensus* scale; 1) Do you think that a majority of community members are in agreement about the risk that sex offenders pose? 2) Do you think that many community members feel that changes must be made in the supervision of sex offenders? 3) Do you think that community members in general feel threatened by sex offenders as a group? 4) Do you think that a majority of community members are in agreement that children are at risk of being sexually victimized? 5) Do you think that many community members feel that sex offenders are too dangerous to be living in the community? All five items were measured on a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "definitely not" (1) "to definitely yes" (4). Factor analysis confirmed that all five items loaded onto the same factor at .745 or higher, and reliability analysis confirmed that the multi-item, averaged, scale was reliable and appropriate to use in the models (Cronbach's alpha = .892).

Five items were also used to create the *volatility* scale; 1) Do you think that law enforcement reacts quickly when a sexual offense takes place? 2) Do you think that legislators work fast enough to get necessary registry laws passed to further keep track of sex offenders? 3) Do you think that the media reports on sex offense cases too quickly before all of the facts are gathered? 4) Do you think that the quick response of the media makes communities safer because people are made aware of the sex offense? 5) Do you think that police are too slow to catch sex offenders when sex offenses take place? All five items were measured on a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "definitely not" (1) "to definitely yes" (4). Factor analysis confirmed that all five items loaded onto the same factor at .713 or higher, and reliability analysis confirmed that the multi-item, averaged, scale was reliable and appropriate to use in the models (Cronbach's alpha = .852).

Four items were also used to create the *disproportionality* scale; 1) Do you feel that the current state of the sex offender registry is too harsh? 2) Do you think that keeping sex offenders on electronic monitoring/GPS tracking for more than five years without a break is too severe a punishment? 3) Do you think that sex offenders should report to law enforcement more than two times per year? 4) Do you think that the media overreacts in their reporting of sex offenses when they occur in a community? All four items were measured on a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "definitely not" (1) "to definitely yes" (4). Item 3 was the only one not reverse coded for directionality purposes. Originally, this scale contained five items like the previous four moral panic scales, but one item was

removed due to a low factor loading. The completed factor analysis confirmed that four of the five items loaded onto the same factor at .748 or higher, and reliability analysis confirmed that the multi-item, averaged, scale was reliable and appropriate to use in the models (Cronbach's alpha = .835).

Dependent Variable

The current study seeks to determine whether participants perceived the sex offender registry to be effective in reducing sex offender recidivism. This was done through the use of a single measure asking participants to respond to the following statement: "The sex offender registry is effective in reducing sex offender reoffending." Response options were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). The directionality of these response options would indicate that those who agree with the statement might believe that the misperception focused on the alleged high rates of recidivism associated with sex offenders. Most commonly, participants reported they "agree" (4) with the above statement (n=293, 33.4%). The dependent variable is normally distributed as per the Shapiro-Wilk's test (M = 3.08, SD = 1.08).

Analytic Plan

This study uses participant demographics (control variables), registry strictness, search and knowledge variables, and the theoretical predictors of a moral panic to predict participants' perceptions in the reduction in sex offender recidivism. Before the analyses were conducted, the data was assessed for missing variables. Only a small amount (less than 5%) was found, suggesting that single imputation with median replacement was appropriate for the missing data as many of the variables were whole numbers. This was chosen over listwise deletion due to the potential bias and error that is associated with that technique (Cheema, 2014; Peng, Harwell, Lious, & Ehman, 2006; Schafer & Graham, 2002). Due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, the use of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was an appropriate choice for the multivariate regression used in this study. The study's results are discussed below.

Results

T-Tests and Chi-Square Analyses

Independent sample t-tests were conducted to examine mean differences for the control variables of gender, race, ethnicity, education level and geographic location in regard to the dependent variable. There was no significant mean difference for the gender, race, ethnicity, education level, or geographic location variables.

Furthermore, chi-square tests were conducted to examine age and population size in relation to the dependent variables, but no statistically significant differences exist. The t-tests and chi-square analyses were conducted to see if there were any group level differences in perceived reduction of sex offender recidivism. The results of these analyses show that there are no group level differences regarding how individuals perceive the registry's effectiveness in reducing recidivism.

Multivariate Regression Analysis

For the multivariate regression analysis in this study, an ordinary least squares (OLS) analysis was used to predict the participants' perceived reduction in recidivism. For this model, a total of 24.7% of the variance was explained by the predictor variables ($F(2,875) = 16.80, p < .001$). Of the control variables, age, race and education level were significant with younger individuals ($b = -.05, p < .01$), non-White participants ($b = -.19, p < .01$), and those with at least a Bachelor's degree ($b = .16, p < .05$) were likely to perceive the sex offender registry as being effective in terms of reducing sex offender recidivism. Of the registry support, search and knowledge variables, only registry support was significant within the model. This indicates that those individuals who support the registry in its current form ($b = .10, p < .01$) are more likely to perceive the registry as being effective in reducing sex offender recidivism levels.

Finally, only three of the five moral panic measures were significant predictors of participants' perceptions of registry effectiveness in reducing sex offender recidivism. Concern, and disproportionality lacked statistical significance. Those participants who felt more hostile toward sex offenders ($b = .12, p < .05$), felt more consensus about this issue within the community ($b = .15, p < .05$), and who believed that a volatile response toward sex offenders was occurring ($b = .75, p < .001$) were more likely to believe that the sex offender registry was effective in reducing sex offender recidivism levels. A triplet of OLS regressions was also conducted in a step-wise fashion to see if any mediation was occurring by the subsequent addition of variable groups (Baron & Kenny, 1986). While there was some loss of statistical significance within the control variables, and the registry support, search, and knowledge variables, the coefficients did not change much in size, suggesting that a full mediation effect is not occurring. Therefore, the decision was made to simply present the full OLS regression model within this manuscript. *Table 4* shows the results for the full OLS regression model.

Table 4 OLS Regression Models Predicting Perceived Reduction in Recidivism

Variable	Model C			
	<i>b</i>		<i>SE</i>	β
Gender (Female)	-.04		.02	-.01
Age	-.05	**	.03	-.09
Race (White)	-.19	**	.08	-.08
Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic)	>-.01		.01	-.01
Education Level (College Degree)	.16	*	.07	.06
Population Size	-.04		.03	-.04
Geographic Region (South)	-.05		.07	-.02
Registry Support	.10	**	.04	.08
Registry Strictness	-.06		.04	-.05
Search for Sex Offenders	-.11		.07	-.03
Estimated Number of Sex Offenders	.03		.01	.06
Registry Knowledge	-.01		.02	-.01
Stereotypical Sex Offender	-.03		.03	-.04
Concern	.04		.06	.03
Hostility	.12	*	.07	.10
Consensus	.15	*	.07	.11
Disproportionality	-.12		.08	-.06
Volatility	.75	***	.07	.41
Constant	1.51		.27	
F Statistic	16.80***			
R Square	.247			

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Discussion

Although only three of the five moral panic measures were significant, they were consistent in terms of directionality as seen in the examination of previous literature. When community members exhibit anger toward sex offenders (hostility), believe that there is agreement in the community about the posed threat (consensus), and indicate that current efforts to contain the problem are not rash or knee-jerk reactions (volatility), they are more likely to believe that the current measures are perceptually effective in reducing control sex offender recidivism. Meaning if the participants believe that SORN legislation was implemented properly, wasn't hastily put together, and is meeting its legislative objectives, then these laws must be effective in reducing recidivism levels. The sex offender registry serves as a control mechanism for registrants post-conviction, even though it is not technically a criminal sanction (Smith v. Doe, 2003). Yet if participants perceive the

threat from the folk devil group to be continuously occurring (Burchfield et al., 2014), then they will support efforts meant to protect them from the threat, especially if they believe that the current efforts are not effective in doing so. Previous research suggests that not only will community members support continued efforts to contain the threat that sex offenders pose, but may support increasingly punitive response against this offender group as well (Authors, In Press).

Working under the lens of a perpetual panic as described by Burchfield and colleagues (2014), this study sought to examine the relationship between the elements of a panic and the belief that the sex offender registry is an effective mechanism in reducing sex offender recidivism. Based on how a perpetual panic operates, it could be hypothesized that community members would not believe that the registry is an effective tool in recidivism reduction. When additional sex crimes occur and the media covers the story, the moral panic associated with registered sex offenders seemingly renews itself, as do the calls for additional legislation. These calls provide legislators with rationale for the expansions (O'Hear, 2008), despite their own mixed recognition as to whether SORN laws are really effective in controlling sex offenders the way that the public desires (Meloy et al., 2013).

Given these assumptions regarding the panic and the public's beliefs about sex offender recidivism, the results of this study are somewhat surprising. There are a few findings that need to be discussed in detail. First, race was significant in the model but the variable's coefficient suggests that non-White participants are more likely to believe the registry to be an effective tool in reducing sex offender recidivism levels compared to White participants. One possible explanation for the disparity in beliefs between White and non-White participants could be related to the sex offenders themselves. As per the Ackerman et al. study (2011), the majority of registered sex offenders are White and offend intra-rationally. Due to offending patterns, non-White participants may have a different type of exposure to sex offenders than White participants. This finding needs more examination given the strength of the variable in the model – it is the second strongest variable aside from volatility.

The significance and directionality of the education level variable indicates those with more formal education tend to believe that the registry is an effective tool in reducing recidivism. Although research has suggested that this efficacy does not exist (Jennings, Zgoba, & Tewksbury, 2012; Tewksbury, Jennings, & Zgoba, 2012; Zgoba, Witt, Dalessandro, & Veysey, 2008), it is surprising that those participants

with higher levels of formal education believe this misperception to be true. One possible explanation may rest in the idea that individuals with higher levels of formal education tend to be less punitive in their beliefs (Dowler, 2003), and may therefore be hoping that the current laws are effective, thus eliminating the need for increased legislation. This notion ties into the idea that SORN legislation creates a false sense of security for community members and is more symbolic in nature in an attempt to curb the moral panic associated with these offenders (Sample, Evans, & Anderson, 2011). These laws give the perception of efficacy, but do not have much of an effect on reducing recidivism levels for a group of offenders who do not have very high recidivism levels to begin with (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004).

These findings have been framed within the construct of a perpetual moral panic, with Cohen's original elements serving as predictor variables (1972, 2002). The scaled variables measuring the five elements of the moral panic were created by the researchers and were only used in one other study to date (Authors, In Press). While only three of the five moral panic elements were significant predictors of the dependent variable, they were most likely the driving factors in the predictive strength of the overall model. The previously discussed step-wise analysis showed an 18.3% increase in the R² from the control only model to the full regression analysis model. Although the full step-wise model was not included in this analysis due to a lack of full mediation occurring, it is probable that the moral panic measures are the driving factor in the analysis given the increase in R². In particular, volatility proved to be the strongest variable in the model based on its reported coefficient. The positive relationship indicates that participants do not believe that the response to controlling sex crimes is knee-jerk in nature. Although it was not a significant predictor variable in the final model, registry strictness displayed a negative relationship with the dependent variable. This indicates that individuals who believe that the registry is already strict might believe that a strict atmosphere would be a deterrent one, thus controlling reoffending opportunities. These individuals might believe that a strict environment would be the result of well-crafted SORN legislation that was developed in a systematic way to supervise and control sex offenders post-conviction. Scholars have acknowledged that SORN legislation was not based on empirically evaluated recommendations (Durling, 2006), but community members perceive them to be effective nonetheless.

Limitations

Although participants did believe that the sex offender registry was effective in reducing sex offender recidivism, future research would benefit from additional

items measuring efficacy of this legislation. Specifically, additional measures could capture perceptions of efficacy in reducing recidivism for specific offender groups (contact vs non-contact, having adult victims vs child victims), gender of the offender, specific crimes, and registration duration. Furthermore, measures could focus more on different aspects of SORN legislation including community notification efforts and state laws regarding residency restrictions. A general blanket statement regarding the registry, as a whole, might be too broad of a statement in trying to capture all of the nuances of SORN legislation.

A second limitation of the study focuses on the sample. Given that data were collected from all fifty-states, it was beyond the scope of the study to create an instrument for each state's registry system. While states are somewhat similar in terms of how they implement SORN laws, there are no two states that are absolutely identical in implementation (Mancini, 2013). Furthermore, only 18 states are in full or partial compliance with the Adam Walsh Act according to The Council of State Governments (2017). While the measures used in this study were general enough for all participants to respond, future research would benefit from clustered research focused on geographic location, individual state comparisons, or even based on the number of sex offenders living in specific states. The specificity of the measures based on the above criteria may have an impact on the results concerning participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the sex offender registry on reducing sex offender recidivism levels.

Another potential limitation of the study is the measurement of the stereotypical sex offender variable. In trying to keep to the true demographic profile of individuals placed on the sex offender registry as per the Ackerman et al. study (2011), this variable might be too nuanced in terms of a profile. Future development of the stereotypical sex offender index might benefit from a more expanded set of response options for specific items like offender age and offender/victim relationship. Finally, we acknowledge that in the search for sex offenders variable, the term "nearby" needed to be expanded upon with a specific distance included. The simple use of "nearby" could be interpreted in a very subjective manner with different interpreted distances among participants.

Conclusions

The moral panic surrounding registered sex offenders is described as being perpetual in nature (Burchfield et al., 2014), rather than the traditional flash and fade moral panic as explained by Cohen (1972; 2002). Given the perpetual, and somewhat permanent, nature of this panic, community members may have grown

accustomed to living with anger and worry associated with registered sex offenders. This has contributed to the expansion of SORN legislation over the last two decades and promises to remain an ongoing discussion for years to come. While memorial laws like Megan's Law have had good legislative intentions, researchers have reported a variety of unintended consequences associated with the passage of these "feel good" laws including unemployment, homelessness, and harassment (Chajewski & Mercado, 2008; Klein, Tolson, & Collins, 2014; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tolson & Klein, 2015; Zgoba, Levenson, & McKee, 2008). The results of this study suggest that participants believe the registry to be an effective tool in reducing recidivism, despite empirical research that disputes this belief (Jennings et al., 2012; Tewksbury et al., 2012; Zgoba, Witt, et al., 2008). This disjunct is worrisome given how influential the collective can be when it comes to demanding increasingly punitive crime control measures, such as expansions to current SORN legislation by including additional symbolic reforms (Sample et al., 2011).

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