

Student Attitudes Toward Sex Offender Policies: Are There Differences Between Students Who Complete A Sex Crimes Course And Other Students?

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Abstract

Research has assessed the attitudes of the general public and professionals in the criminal justice field toward sex offender policies including registration, community notification, residency restrictions and electronic monitoring. Research focusing on student attitudes toward these policies is lacking. The present study seeks to partially fill that void and contributes to the literature on college student attitudes and more specifically toward sex offender policies. The attitudes of students who completed a sex crimes course are compared with students completing introductory criminal justice and psychology courses. Students expressed overwhelming support for some of these policies and significant differences were found between the groups for electronically monitoring sex offenders and sex offenders receiving the maximum penalties allowed by law.

Keywords: sex offender policies; registration; community notification; residency restrictions; electronic monitoring; student attitudes toward sex offenders

1. Introduction

Jessica Lunsford, Jacob Wetterling and Megan Nicole Kanka were all children abducted and sexually assaulted before they were murdered by their abductor. These children, in addition to others have one more thing in common; they are all listed in the Declaration of Purpose in Title I of The Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) or Public Law 109-248. This Act, also known as the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act or Adam Walsh Act, established a national system for registering sex offenders with the intent of protecting children and others from sex offenders (Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, 2006). But, Public Law 109-248 was not the first piece of legislation to establish the registration and community notification of sex offenders.

The 1994 Jacob Wetterling Crimes against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act was passed by Congress. This Act, also known as the Jacob Wetterling Act, required states to have sex offenders register their location with law enforcement for ten years after their release into the community (Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, 1994). After the 1994 abduction, sexual assault, and murder of Megan Nicole Kanka in New Jersey, individual states began to pass legislation referred to as Megan's Law. These laws require communities to be notified when a convicted sex offender moves into the community. In 1996 a federal version of Megan's Law was passed by Congress as an Amendment to the 1994 Jacob Wetterling Act, which allows law enforcement to release sex offender registry information to the public in order for the public to protect themselves (Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, 2016). The Jacob Wetterling Improvements Act (1997) was passed by Congress as part of the Appropriations Act of 1998 and requires states to participate in a National Sex Offender Registry (Jacob Wetterling Improvements Act, 1997).

The 2003 Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act (PROTECT Act) requires states to publish sex offender registration information on public websites, thus expanding the information available to the public and with easier access (Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act, 2003).

The expansion of sex offender registration and notification through the Adam Walsh Act (2006) not only created a national system of registration, it created minimum standards for sex offender registration. The Act required more information about convicted sex offenders be collected for law enforcement use and allowed additional information to be placed on the public registries (Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, 2006). In essence, the Adam Walsh Act (2006) was to make sex offender registration and community notification more uniform across the country. Many of the policies to manage and control sex offenders are the result of a small, although one is too many, number of child abduction, sexual assault and murder cases. Many in the public believe in the idea of “stranger danger” and the argument made is that if the public knows the identity of sex offenders and that they are in their community, child abduction and sexual assault cases could be prevented.

2. Literature Review

Laws targeting sex offenders seem prevalent today but they have been around for over half a century, beginning in the 1930’s and 1940’s (Ackerman, Sacks & Greenberg, 2012 and Levenson & D’Amora, 2007). Much of the legislation targeting sex offenders is due to fear generated by high profile cases, the myths associated with sex offenders, and what policy makers believe the public wants. Research examining the reasons for sex offender legislation found that policy makers who sponsored or wrote sex offender legislation cited public safety as the main reason for the legislation but the main catalyst for legislation controlling sex offenders was linked to a specific victimization although it was a crime that occurred elsewhere and most crimes involved children (Meloy, Curtis & Boatwright, 2013).

Media serve as a primary source of information about crime and plays a large part in shaping what the public believes to be true about sex offenders. Television, radio and newspapers have traditionally been how the public gains information about sex offender policies. A public opinion survey by the Center for Sex Offender Management (2012) found that the news media was the main source for what 74% of respondents knew about sex offenders. Researchers have identified misperceptions, biases and myths that surround sex offenders and the fact that the media perpetuates these inaccuracies (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney & Baker, 2007; Cheit, 2003; Ducat, Thomas & Blood, 2009; & Frei, 2008). The media portrayal of a sex offender is an innately older male who is a stranger that preys on female victims. Gavin (2005) found newspapers received the highest response rate followed by television for influencing perceptions for child sex offenders and for being the most influential categories to shape those perceptions.

The reality is that very few missing and murdered children fit into the stereotypical view the media portrays and the public seems to believe. Most child victims of sexual assault are not victimized by a stranger that abducts them; they are victimized by someone they know. Child sexual assault by strangers account for less than ten percent of the cases reported to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS). Reports to NIBRS covering 1991 – 1996, show that 34.2% of juvenile victims were sexually assaulted by a family member, 58.7% by an acquaintance and 7.0% by a stranger (Snyder, 2000). A study of repeat sex offenders found 87.2% of the sex offenses committed against children were committed by someone the child knew (Maguire & Singer, 2011).

2.1 Attitudes toward Sex Offenders and Sex Offender Policies

The public holds inaccurate perceptions about sex offenders believing that strangers commit sex offenses and that sex offenders have higher recidivism rates than scientific research indicates (Levenson et al., 2007; Koon-Magnin, 2015; Brown, Deakin & Spencer, 2008). Professionals working in the criminal justice field also hold negative views of sex offenders. A survey of front line officers in two federal correctional institutions in Canada found “sex offenders were perceived to be more dangerous, harmful, violent, tense, bad, unpredictable, mysterious, unchangeable, aggressive, weak, irrational, and afraid compared with non-sex offenders” (Weekes, Pelletier & Beaudette, 1995, 59). A majority of probation/parole officers and community corrections professionals believed sex offenders are dangerous (Conley, Hill, Church II, Stoeckel, & Allen, 2011) and Connor and Tewksbury (2013) found most prison wardens agreed that when the victim of a sex crime is a child even other inmates believe it is “appalling conduct.”

Over the last ten years researchers have focused on sex offender registration and notification and, more recently, on the use of residency restrictions and electronic monitoring for sex offenders. A public survey found a majority of respondents believed sex offender recidivism could be reduced by electronic monitoring, residency restrictions, and having information about sex offenders available to the public (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2010). Other studies find a majority of individuals surveyed support the use of sex offender registries (Mears, Mancini, Gertz & Bratton, 2008; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009) or believed that community notification reduces sex crimes (Levenson et al, 2007; Koon-Magnin, 2015). Punitive attitudes toward sex offenders were expressed by the number of years in prison respondents thought sex offenders should receive with ninety-nine years being the most common response (Levenson et al, 2007).

The primary purpose of the sex offender registry and community notification is to keep the public safe. Individuals must access the registry to obtain information about sex offenders in the community. These policies can create a false sense of security if community members do not access the registry and are unaware of sex offenders in their communities. Research examining the public's use of sex offender registries found 34.8% of Nebraska residents (Anderson & Sample, 2008), 37% of Michigan residents (Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun & Kernsmith, 2009), and 17% of New Jersey residents surveyed had accessed the registry (Boyle, Ragusa-Salerno, Marcus, Passannante & Furrer, 2014).

In general, residency restrictions specify locations and a distance from those locations that sex offenders must avoid. Alabama was the first state to pass residency restriction laws in 1996 (Walker, 2007). As recently as June, 2016 thirty-three states have residency restrictions and numerous additional residency restrictions have been passed by local city and county governments across the country. These laws vary by state and vary in the restrictive distance such as 300 feet in Montana or one-half mile as in California (Reform Sex Offender Laws, 2016). The locations specified in state statutes and local ordinances also vary and may include schools, daycare centers, playgrounds, parks, libraries, athletic fields, school bus stops, and hike and bike trails.

The thought that restricting where sex offenders may live will keep children safer and prevent sexual victimization by strangers has been the focus of research over the past decade. Researchers found a majority of the public supports residency restrictions (Mears, et al., 2008; Center for Sex Offender Management, 2010; Mancini, Shields, Mears & Beaver, 2010) or believe residency restrictions are effective in reducing the risk of re-offending by sex offenders (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2010; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009). The public perceives sex offenders as more likely to reoffend, that residency restrictions are effective in reducing recidivism for sex offenders and that these laws should be enforced even though scientific evidence to show the effectiveness of residency restrictions is lacking. (Levenson et al., 2007; Levenson, Shields & Singleton, 2014).

The public may buy into the idea of residency restrictions reducing recidivism by sex offenders because they believe sex offenders target children in the area of schools but research does not support this idea. Maguire and Singer (2011) sought to determine if sex offenders were likely to reoffend near a school or park boundary. They found the offenders' home was the most common location for the sex offense and that schools and parks were not a significant place where victims met the offender.

Electronic monitoring is becoming another popular method of monitoring sex offenders. Inspired by a Spiderman comic, Judge Jack Love of New Mexico was the first to implement electronic monitoring in 1984 (DeMichele, Payne & Button, 2007; Burrell & Gable, 2008). Currently, the electronic monitoring of sex offenders is not required in all fifty states and there are no federal guidelines for electronic monitoring. The Adam Walsh Act (2006) allowed for electronic monitoring but no funding was authorized. In a content analysis of legislation addressing electronic monitoring in all 50 states Button, DeMichele, and Payne (2009) found the use of electronic monitoring included in the legislation of forty-seven states with 27 of those states including policies for monitoring sex offenders specifically and nineteen of the states requiring it for sex offenders. The public tends to believe recidivism by sex offenders can be reduced through the use of electronic monitoring (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2010; Button, Tewksbury, Mustaine & Payne, 2013; Budd & Mancini, 2015) and individuals will still support it without scientific evidence to support its effectiveness (Levenson et al, 2007).

Members of the general public are not the only group who support policies to control sex offenders. Researchers have explored professionals' attitudes toward, and support for, sex offender policies. These professionals working in the criminal justice field and related areas may be working with sex offenders therefore their attitudes are important.

Levenson, Fortney and Baker (2010) found less than half of professionals who work with sex offenders or victims of sex offenses support community notification for all sex offenders. Twenty-five percent of these professionals support sex offenders policies even when there is no scientific evidence to support they are effective. The majority (62%) of respondents did not believe child sexual abuse will be reduced by residency restrictions. When researchers compared those working in the criminal justice field to other professionals they found significant differences between the two groups in regards to supporting community notification for all sex offenders and support for residency restrictions with the criminal justice professionals showing more support for both policies (Levenson et al., 2010).

Support for sex offender registration and community notification was found to be supported by community corrections professionals (Tewksbury, Mustaine & Payne, 2012) parole board members (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012), and law enforcement officials (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). Respondents in all three groups would support residency restrictions even without scientific evidence to show they are effective and law enforcement showed stronger support even when scientific evidence of effectiveness is lacking (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013).

2.2 Student Attitudes

Exploratory research has consistently surveyed student attitudes as students are a convenient sample due to the ease of their accessibility to faculty researchers. Since the late 1990s, students in criminology/criminal justice classes or programs have been the focus of a number of research studies. Students enrolled in or majoring in criminal justice/criminology courses have been surveyed about their attitudes toward punitiveness (Shelley, Waid & Dobbs, 2011; Tajalli, DeSoto, & Dozier, 2013), and electronic monitoring (Payne & Gainey, 1999; Maljević & Muftić, 2014; Muftić, Payne & Maljević, 2015). The attitudes of criminology/criminal justices students have also been compared to students in other majors on issues related punitiveness (Falco & Martin, 2012; Mackey & Courtright, 2000), and crime and punishment (Lambert, 2004).

Research comparing the views of students majoring in criminal justice to the students in other majors found criminal justice majors expressed harsher views on crime as a serious social problem, revenge toward violent criminals, and the belief that the courts are not being harsh enough with criminals (Lambert, 2004).

Mackey & Courtright (2000) and Shelley et al., (2011) found criminal justice/criminology students hold more punitive views of criminal sanctioning than students in other majors while Tsoudis (2000) and Falco and Martin (2012) found criminal justice/criminology students hold less punitive views than students in other majors. Mackey and Courtright (2000) found that at each grade level criminal justice majors showed more punitive attitudes. Tsoudis (2000) found stronger support for harsher punishments by females and older students while Falco and Martin (2012) found freshman students were more punitive than upper classmen.

A growing area of research utilizing samples of criminal justice/criminology students is in the area of knowledge and attitudes about and toward sex crimes, sex offenders, and policies to punish or control sex offenders. In matters related to sex crimes researchers have surveyed students about stereotypes of sex offenders (Shechory & Idisis, 2006), beliefs about sex offenders (Fuselier, Durham & Wurtele, 2002), attitudes toward female sex offenders (Gakhil & Brown, 2011), perceptions of statutory rape offenders (Sahl & Keene, 2012), and attitudes about rapists (Lev-Wiesel, 2004). Additional research utilizing student samples has focused on punitiveness and punishment for specific sex crimes or sex offenders (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Tajalli et al., 2013; McDonald & Kline, 2004; Kjelsberg, Rustad & Skoglund, 2007; Wolfe & Higgins, 2008; Valliant, Furac & Antonowicz, 1994), and the use of electronic monitoring for sex offenders (Muftić et al., 2015).

Students, like the general public, hold misperceptions about sex crimes and sex offenders. Fuselier et al. (2002) compared the perceptions of college students and professionals who treat sexual offenders. The two groups showed significant differences in the offenders' use of force or threats with students believing this to more often be the case. Students also differed significantly in their belief that the offenders are strangers. Female students and female therapists were found to hold more stereotyped views of sex offenders and were more inclined to believe rape myths (Shechory & Idisis, 2006). A study of college students, inmates and prison employees in Norway found the number of convicted sex offenders in prison was estimated to be higher than reality by students and prisoners (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). Gakhil and Brown (2011) compared the attitudes of students, the public and probation officers toward female sex offenders. The public held the most negative attitudes, the probation officers had the most favourable attitudes and the student attitudes were in between.

Students, like the public, also hold punitive attitudes toward sex offenders. Rogers and Ferguson (2011) found support for their hypothesis that students hold more punitive attitudes toward sex offenders. In a survey of first and third year female psychology college students Valliant et al. (1994) found that both groups agreed that two years in prison should be the punishment for a sex offender while Kjelsberg et al. (2007) found college students in Norway believe punishment is too mild for sex offenses. The offenses committed by a sex offender can influence views about punishment. Males have been shown to hold less punitive views than females in regard to the punishment for those who solicit children online for sex (Wolfe & Higgins, 2008) and date rape situations (McDonald & Kline, 2004).

One area where research is lacking is in regard to the policies to control sex offenders. Two recent studies have examined student attitudes toward electronic monitoring of sex offenders and another recent study examined student attitudes toward sex offender registration, notification, residency restrictions and electronic monitoring.

A majority of graduate students enrolled in a criminal justice policy course in Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed that electronic monitoring serves as a deterrent to prevent crime in general but disagreed that it is appropriate for sex offenders (Maljević & Muftić, 2014). Muftić et al. (2015) compared attitudes of students in the U.S. with students in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the appropriateness of electronic monitoring for a variety of offenses and found the lowest support was expressed for sex offenders.

Wiersma & Siedschlaw (2016) found an overwhelming majority of the students taking an introductory criminal justice course supported the following policies for sex offenders either always or frequently; registration (93%), residency restrictions (92%), maximum penalties or sentences allowed by law (84%) and community notification (75%). Support was low (36.63%) for always or frequently using electronic monitoring for sex offenders.

Research is lacking in the area of student attitudes toward sex offender registration, community notification, and residency restrictions. The present study seeks to narrow this gap by comparing the attitudes of students in introductory criminal justice and introductory psychology courses to students who completed a sex crimes course to determine if differences exist in their support for sex offender policies. Criminal justice students may one day be the future politicians passing legislation to control sex offenders or criminal justice professionals, who investigate, arrest, prosecute, sentence, and supervise sex offenders. Knowing how students view sex offenders and the policies to control them is a starting point to better prepare students with the scientific evidence about sex offenders and the impacts of sex offender policies.

3. Methods

The data was collected at the University of Nebraska at Kearney with approval of the Institutional Review Board. The questions were created around the topics covered in an upper division criminal justice course focused on sex offender policies. The intent here is to determine if there is a difference in attitudes between those students who have, and have not, taken a sex crimes course.

The survey was completed by undergraduate students who had taken a sex crimes course and students in two sections of an introductory criminal justice course and two sections of a general psychology course. Both of the introductory courses are general studies courses at the university. None of the respondents in the psychology course had taken the introductory criminal justice course and no students in the introductory courses had taken the sex crimes course.

Students completed the survey two weeks before the end of the semester. It was necessary to collect the data from the students in the sex crimes course over a number of semesters due to the limited course enrollment of upper level courses. The same instructor taught all sections of the sex crimes course using the same textbook and assignments. The one major difference in content was the daily discussion of current events. The surveys were administered to the introductory courses the last semester the survey data was collected in the sex crimes course.

Students were told the survey was voluntary and their responses would remain anonymous. All students present in class the day the survey was administered completed the survey. In Nebraska students must be 19 years old to give informed consent to participate in a research study therefore, any surveys completed by students under age 19 were destroyed. The total number of usable completed surveys was 355; 196 in the introductory courses and 159 from the sex crimes course.

The survey contained statements regarding specific policies used to control sex offenders. The statements included for analysis here include “sex offenders should receive the maximum sentence or penalties allowed by law,” “sex offenders should be required to register with law enforcement officials,” “sex offender’s names should be released to the public through the media or other sources such as the Internet,” “sex offenders should be restricted from living close to schools, daycares, parks, and other places children congregate,” and “sex offenders should be required to wear electronic monitoring devices.” The survey asked students if they personally know a sex offender and if they had accessed the sex offender registry in Nebraska. Limited demographic information was collected including sex, age and year in school.

Students were asked to respond to statements on a Likert scale with the responses including: “never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, or “always”. An additional response choice of “I don’t know what this means” was also included. The answers were coded and entered into SPSS with 1 for “never”, 2 for “rarely”, 3 for “sometimes”, 4 for “frequently”, and 5 for “always” Chi-square tests were performed to determine if significant differences existed between the students who took the sex crimes class and the students in the introductory criminal justice and psychology courses (comparison group). It was necessary to collapse the responses into three categories due to the low response numbers in the “never” and “rarely” categories.

4. Results

The results are presented using descriptive statistics. Chi-square tests were performed on each question to determine if there were significant differences in attitudes between the students who completed a sex crimes course and students who completed introductory courses in either criminal justice or general psychology (comparison group).

The survey was completed by a total of 355 students; 159 who completed a sex crimes course and 196 students in the comparison group. Overall, 42.25% were males 57.75% were female. There were a larger proportion of females in both groups. In the sex crimes course 40.25% were male and 59.75% were female. The comparison group was 43.88% male and 56.12% female.

Overall, the majority of the students were upper classman (61.41%) with 14.08% identified as freshmen, 23.66% sophomores, 33.80% juniors, and 27.61% seniors. One student identified as a graduate student and two students identified as having a degree, taking additional classes. These three students comprised less than one percent (.84%) of the respondents. The overall mean age was 21.49; 21.51 for males and 21.47 for females.

The majority of the sex crimes class students (90.57%) were upper classmen; 42.77% juniors and 47.80% seniors. There were no freshmen in the sex crimes class group and only 9.43% were sophomores. The mean age for the students who completed the sex crimes course was 22.52; 22.58 for males and 22.47 for females. A majority (67.32%) of the students who completed the sex crimes course did not personally know a sex offender.

The majority (60.71%) of the comparison group were underclassmen; 25.51% freshmen and 35.20% sophomores. Juniors comprised 26.53% of this group and 11.22% were seniors. Three students (1.52%) identified as being either a graduate student (1 student) or as having a degree and taking additional classes (two students). The mean age for the students in the comparison group was 20.66; 20.72 for males and 20.61 for females. A majority (72.45%) of the students in the comparison group did not personally know a sex offender.

Overall, over half (56.34%) of the students had accessed the Nebraska sex offender registry and the majority of these students (57.0%) did it on their own compared to 20.5% of the students who accessed it for a class and 22.5% who accessed it for both a class and on their own.

A majority (81.76%) of the students who completed the sex crimes course had accessed the Nebraska sex offender registry compared to only 35.71% of the comparison group. A much larger percentage (74.29%) of the students in the comparison group accessed the Nebraska sex offender registry on their own compared to 47.69% of the sex crimes students who accessed the registry on their own. A larger proportion of the sex crimes students (22.31%) had accessed the Nebraska sex offender registry for a class compared to 17.15% of the students in the comparison group. Thirty percent of the sex crimes students had accessed the registry for both a class and on their own compared to only 8.57% of the comparison group.

4.1 Maximum Penalties

Overall, the majority of students (78.03%) believe sex offenders should always or frequently receive the maximum sentence or penalties allowed by law. Only one student indicated this should never be the case.

The majority (72.96%) of students that completed the sex crimes course believed that sex offenders should always or frequently receive the maximum sentence or penalties allowed by law compared to 82.15% of the students in the comparison group. The chi-square test shows this difference is statistically significant ($X^2(2, 355) = 19.244$, $p < 0.05$). A significant difference was found between the females in the comparison group and the females who took the sex crimes class ($X^2(2, 205) = 15.690$, $p < 0.05$), those who personally knew a sex offender ($X^2(2, 116) = 10.082$, $p < 0.05$) and those who did not personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 239) = 22.700$, $p < 0.05$). No significant difference was found between the males in the comparison group and the males who completed the sex crimes class.

4.2 Registration

Overall, over ninety percent (94.64%) of the students believe sex offenders should always or frequently be required to register with law enforcement. Again, only one student indicated sex offenders should never have to register and one student indicated sex offenders should rarely have to register.

A majority (95.59%) of the students in the sex crimes class thought sex offenders should always or frequently be required to register with law enforcement compared to 93.88% of the students in the control group. The difference between the two groups is not statistically significant ($X^2(2, 355) = .919$, $p > 0.05$). No significant difference was found between the male students of the two groups ($X^2(2, 150) = 1.079$, $p > 0.05$) or students who did not personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 239) = 4.498$, $p > 0.05$). The chi-square test could not be performed or was invalid for the females and those who personally know a sex offender for the statement that sex offenders should be required to register with law enforcement.

4.3 Community Notification

Overall, a majority (77.46%) of students believe sex offenders names should always or frequently be released to the public through the media or other sources such as the Internet. Fourteen students (3.95%) believed this should never or rarely happen.

The majority (76.73%) of the students that completed the sex crimes course believed that sex offenders should always or frequently have their names released to the public compared to a slightly higher percent (78.06%) of the students in the comparison group. The difference between the comparison group and the sex crimes class students was not statistically significant on the community notification statement ($X^2(2, 355) = 5.099$, $p > 0.05$). There was also no significant difference found for those who personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 116) = 1.523$, $p > 0.05$) or those who did not personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 239) = 3.457$, $p > 0.05$). Significant differences were found between the males in the comparison group and the males in the sex crimes class ($X^2(2, 150) = 8.645$, $p < 0.05$) and between the females in the two groups ($X^2(2, 205) = 6.298$, $p < 0.05$).

4.4 Residency Restrictions

Overall, a majority of students (92.68%) believed sex offenders should always or frequently be restricted from living close to schools, daycares, parks, and other places children congregate. No students marked the never response on this question and only one student believed sex offenders should rarely be subjected to residency restrictions.

The majority of the students (93.08%) that completed the sex crimes course believed that sex offenders should always or frequently be restricted from living close to schools, daycares, parks and other places children congregate compared to 92.35% of the students in the comparison group. The differences between the students in the comparison group and the students in the sex crimes course were not statistically significant ($X^2(2, 355) = 1.517$, $p > 0.05$). There were no significant differences between the males of the two groups ($X^2(2, 150) = .910$, $p > 0.05$), between the females of the two groups ($X^2(2, 205) = .775$, $p > 0.05$), those who personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 116) = 1.157$, $p > 0.05$), and those who did not personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 239) = .031$, $p > 0.05$).

4.5 Electronic Monitoring

In regard to the statement that sex offenders should be required to wear electronic monitoring devices, overall just over one-third (37.46%) of the students thought sex offenders should be required to wear electronic monitoring devices always or frequently. The percentage of students who indicated sex offenders should never or rarely be required to wear electronic monitoring devices was (17.47%).

Less than half (40.88%) of the students that completed the sex crimes course believed that sex offenders should always or frequently be required to wear electronic monitoring devices compared to about one-third (34.70%) of the students in the comparison group. Significant differences were found for all measures tested on the statement that sex offenders should be required to wear electronic monitoring devices. The chi-square test showed significant differences between the students in the comparison group and those who completed a sex crimes course ($X^2(2, 355) = 18.744, p < 0.05$). Significant differences were also found between the males in the two groups ($X^2(2, 150) = 6.765, p < 0.05$), between the females in the two groups ($X^2(2, 205) = 13.684, p < 0.05$), those who personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 116) = 17.902, p < 0.05$), and those who did not personally know a sex offender ($X^2(2, 239) = 8.455, p < 0.05$).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study shows college students overwhelming support some policies currently in place to monitor and control sex offenders. A majority of the students in the present study support sex offender registration, community notification, and residency restrictions which mirrors research showing that a majority of the public support one or more of these policies (Levenson et al., 2007; Mears et al., 2008; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009; Center for Sex Offender Management, 2010; Mancini et al., 2010; Button et al., 2013; Levenson et al., 2014; Budd & Mancini 2015; Koon-Magnin, 2015) and the support shown by criminal justice professionals including community corrections professionals (Tewksbury et al., 2012); parole board members (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012); law enforcement officials (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013); and those professionals who work with sex crime victims and sex offenders (Levenson et al., 2010).

Significant differences were found between the students who took a sex crimes class and those in the introductory psychology and criminal justice courses in regard to sex offenders receiving the maximum sentence or penalties allowed by law and requiring sex offenders to wear electronic monitoring devices. The support for maximum sentences or penalties allowed by law was greater for the students in the introductory courses while support for electronic monitoring of sex offenders had stronger support by the students in the sex crimes course. No significant differences were found between students who completed a sex crimes class and students in the introductory psychology and criminal justice courses in regard to requiring sex offenders to register, residency restrictions and community notification.

More than twice the proportion of students who had completed a sex crimes course had accessed the Nebraska Sex offender registry compared to the students in the introductory courses. The low proportion of students in the introductory courses whom accessed the registry mirrors the findings of Anderson and Sample (2008), Kernsmith et al. (2009) and Boyle et al. (2014). The students in the introductory courses in the present study were predominately underclassmen compared to less than ten percent underclassmen in the sex crimes class. Underclassmen do tend to live in the dorms and that may be an explanation as to why just over one-third of the students in the introductory courses had accessed the sex offender registry. College students may feel they themselves are at low risk of sexual victimization or students may be under the false impression that sex offenders do not exist on their campus.

Student interest in a sex crimes course may be what led to these students' interest in accessing the sex offender registry as the sex crimes class does not require students to access the registry. This may be explained by the fact that students in the upper-level elective sex crimes course are mostly criminal justice majors and therefore have more interest in crime and criminal justice issues. As a result, they may be more aware of, and likely to check, the registry. The reason students do or do not access the sex offender registry is an area for future research.

Maljević and Muftić (2014) unexpectedly found less positive views for electronic monitoring by those who reported greater knowledge about electronic monitoring. This could prove to be true about students who critically evaluate other policies to control sex offenders in regard to the effectiveness of these policies and the collateral consequences of these policies for the sex offender, the public, and for the professionals who work in the criminal justice field.

The present study did not examine the reasons students support sex offender registration, notification and residency restriction. Students may support them due to what they believe to be true about sex offenders, because they believe these policies keep the public safe, or because they see the policies as punishment. This merits further study. The present study did not measure support for sex offender policies even when scientific evidence is lacking or beliefs in the effectiveness of these policies (Levenson, Shields & Singleton, 2014; Levenson et al. 2007; Tewksbury et al., 2012; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). This is an area that should be explored with students especially before and after they take a course that provides an in-depth analysis of the specific policies used to monitor and control sex offenders. Student support for sex offender policies may change after taking a course specifically addressing these policies and critically examining the scientific evidence related to the effects and consequences of the policies and may also impact the direction of these policies in the future as these students become professionals in the criminal justice field and potentially law makers.

The present study did not distinguish between different types of sex offenses or sex offenders. Making these distinctions could potentially impact the outcomes of research studies examining attitudes about sex offenders, sex crimes, and sex offender policies. The locations included in residency restriction laws were grouped together in the present study. These could be presented as separate questions/statements in future research (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013).

Payne and Chappell (2008) identify potential weaknesses that may result in research using students as subjects. Ethical concerns raised by Payne and Chappell (2008) include students feeling pressured or obligated to take a survey. In the present study each student was given a survey and told that if they did not want to complete it to submit it with the other student's surveys. This prevented a student having to verbally or physically decline the survey in front of other students and the researchers.

The lack of generalizability is another weakness of using students for survey research. In the present study respondents race was not included. The racial makeup of the sex crimes course specifically was so small that most semesters the classes were only white students. Race was not included on the survey in an effort to ease concerns of any student who might feel that by indicating race the researchers would be able to identify them. Ideally, the survey instrument would be revised and administered to a larger group of students at different size public and private universities in diverse geographic areas in the U.S.

Tewksbury and Mustaine (2012) state that "future studies should continue to systematically examine the views and attitudes of criminal justice and public officials regarding sex offender registration and community notification (p. 429)." This is also true for sex offender residency restrictions and electronic monitoring of sex offenders. The research on sex offender policies has expanded greatly over the last decade and faculty should help students critically analyze the nature of sex offender policies, why they exist, the effectiveness of the policies and the potential of both negative consequences and positive outcomes. In doing this, it is important to examine student knowledge about sex crimes, sex offenders and recidivism, how or where students acquire their knowledge on these issues, their attitudes about specific policies to control sex offenders and the reasons for their support or lack of support for these policies.

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