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### The Effects of Media Exposure on Perceptions of Residence Restrictions

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The effects of media exposure on perceptions of residence restrictions

Stephanie Simeone, B.S.

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## MEDIA AND PERCEPTIONS OF RESIDENCE RESTRICTIONS

### Abstract

Public perceptions impact the formation of sex offender policy, yet much of what the public knows about sex crimes is based in stereotypical narratives provided by the media. The present study investigated the effects of media exposure on perceptions of sexual offending and the efficacy of residence restrictions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three media exposure groups and then asked about their opinions about sexual offending and residence restrictions. Results indicated that participants who viewed sensationalized media reports were more likely than individuals who viewed informed media and no media to endorse more stereotypical views of individuals convicted of a sex offense and were more likely to believe that residence restrictions are effective in reducing sex crimes. These findings will be discussed as they pertain to sexual violence policy.

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### **Introduction**

The increasing public concern and media attention surrounding sexual violence in the past two decades have spurred crime control efforts aimed at individuals convicted of sex offenses (Calkins, Jeglic, Beatty, Zeidman, & Perillo, 2014). This concern for public safety has become of paramount importance to legislation efforts (Lynch, 2002). There are now a number of laws in place (e.g., registries, GPS monitoring) to manage people convicted of a sexual offense once they are released back into society (Calkins et al., 2014). These laws intend to promote public safety from people convicted of sex crimes (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). However, there is ongoing debate as to the effectiveness of these restrictive policies in reducing sexual violence (Calkins et al., 2014; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007).

Residence restrictions prohibit registered sex offenders from living a specified distance from areas where children typically gather (Calkins et al., 2014). Though these laws have the support of the general public, there is a lack of empirical support for the efficacy of residence restrictions in reducing future sex crimes (Levenson, et al., 2007; Mancini, Shields, Mears, & Beaver, 2010; Nobles, Levenson, & Youstin, 2012). Similarly, residence restrictions bring about a number of unintended consequences that subsequently could increase the risk of sexual recidivism (Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012; Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008).

Public perception of people convicted of sexual offenses has implications for the formation of policy (Mancini et al., 2010). However, research suggests that many extant policies are based on media-fueled mythic narratives of people convicted of sexual offenses (Budd & Mancini, 2016). The current study aims to explore the influence of media exposure in public perception of people convicted of sex offenses and support for the efficacy of residence

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restriction policies.

### **Moral Panic**

In part, because of the increased public attention given to heinous yet rare sex crimes, people convicted of sex offenses are subject to extensive monitoring and restrictions once they are released from prison (Calkins et al., 2014). The public's belief in sex offender myths has created a sense of moral panic, "a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 1972, p. 9). According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), moral panics focus on five criteria: public concern, hostility toward perpetrators, consensus in social reaction, disproportionality between the reaction and the threat posed, and the abatement of the panic. This panic is often created by the media, which frequently focuses on anxiety-provoking issues that fuel public concern which prompt them to pressure legislators to make changes (Mears, Mancini, Gertz, & Bratton, 2008). The media's portrayal of sexual offending and those convicted of sex crimes has contributed to a moral panic about this phenomenon (Neuilly & Zgoba, 2006). Moral panics are often unrelated to increased prevalence of a specific threat, but are instead related to an increase in attention to a phenomenon (Zgoba, 2004). Indeed, many sex offender policies have come into law following highly publicized gruesome sex crimes against children (Neuilly & Zgoba, 2006). When the media focuses on the sensational details of a story and repeatedly reports about the same extreme cases, it creates the illusion that sex crimes are on the rise and that perpetrators are exclusively predators who prey on innocent children (Socia & Harris, 2016; Thakker & Durant, 2006).

### **Sexual Offending**

Despite public opinion that sexual crime rates are high, there was a 67% decrease in sexual assaults of minors aged 12-17 years between 1993 to 2004 (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004). More recent estimates indicate that for 17-year old girls, the lifetime rate of sexual assault by an

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adult perpetrator is 11.2%, and 1.9% for males (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014). Similarly, in a study about the location of sex crimes, Calkins and colleagues (2015) found that 0.5% of sex offenses occurred in restricted locations by strangers against a minor victim. This suggests that of the sex crimes that do occur, very few fit the stereotype set forth by the media.

When compared to general offenders, individuals who commit sexual offenses are less likely to reoffend (Harris & Hanson, 2004). Indeed, Hanson and Bussiere (1998) found a 18.9% recidivism rate in a sample of 1,839 rapists, compared to 12.7% in a sample of 9,603 child molesters. Victim choice has been related to different risk estimates for reoffending among individuals who commit sexual offenses (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). Perpetrators who commit different types of sexual offenses against a variety of victims score higher on sexual risk measures than perpetrators of one specific offense or victim type (Jackson & Richards, 2007; Olver, Wong, Nicholaichuk, & Gordon, 2007). These findings suggest that individuals who commit sexual offenses are a heterogeneous group, yet legislation sometimes fails to be tailored to offender risk level. In comparison, the intensity of supervision for general offenders on parole depends partially on the length of time they are on parole, and how well they are doing in the community (e.g., ability to maintain employment, sobriety; Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, 2010).

### **Residence Restrictions**

Sex offender legislation often follows rare and sensational crimes. Following the abduction of a young boy by a sex offender, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offenders Registration Act (1994) was passed. This required states to enforce the registration of individuals who have been convicted of sexual crimes. In 1996, the Jacob Wetterling Act was extended by Megan's Law (1996), which allowed states to publicize

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information from sex offender registries. Making this information accessible to the general public allows people in local communities have the ability to know whether a sex offender lives in their neighborhood (Calkins et al., 2014). In 2006, the Adam Walsh Act extended the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), increasing the length of registration up to 25 years or life and imposed more severe sanctions for individuals who do not register (Zgoba & Levenson, 2012).

To improve the safety of children, residence restriction laws prohibit those convicted of sexual offenses from living in areas where children typically gather (Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008). These include areas such as schools, daycare centers, parks, and bus stops (Nieto & Jung, 2006). Today, more than 30 states and thousands of local municipalities have passed residence restriction laws (Meloy et al., 2008). Jurisdictions vary in the distance of their restrictions, also known as buffer zones, but restricted zones range between 500 feet and 2,000 feet (Calkins et al., 2014). Despite these restrictions, research suggests that residence restrictions may fall short of their intended goal in reducing sexual recidivism (Calkins et al., 2014; Pacheco & Barnes, 2013).

Residence restrictions are based on the premise that sex offenses against children occur near locations where children congregate (Meloy et al., 2008). However, there is a lack of empirical support to suggest that people who commit sexual offenses meet their victims near schools, daycare centers, or parks (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Most people who commit sexual offenses against children already know their victims (Colombino & Mercado, 2009; Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Greenfield, 1997). Indeed, Snyder (2000) reported that 26.7% of sex offenders are a family member of their victims, 59.6% of offenders are acquaintances, and 13.8% are strangers to their victims. Duwe and colleagues (2008) found that 35% of their

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sample of child molesters had “direct contact” with their victims, such as meeting on the street. However, of these incidents, no perpetrator had contact with children in a location that was prohibited by a residence restriction. Colombino and Mercado (2009) reported that the majority of offenders in their sample met victims in a private setting, such as the home of either the offender or the victim, while few offenders met their victims in public locations that would be defined by residence restrictions. Colombino and colleagues (2011) found that less than 5% of the offenders in their sample met victims in designated “off-limit” areas. Similarly, Calkins and colleagues (2015) found that 4% of offenses occurred in locations prohibited by residence restrictions. Among these offenses, 78% involved a minor victim, with acquaintance perpetrators more likely to meet their victims in a prohibited location than strangers or familial offenders. Taken together, this evidence suggests that residence restrictions and loitering policies target less prevalent types of sex crimes.

In addition to the lack of empirical support linking proximity to children with new sex crimes, there are unintended consequences of residence restrictions that could actually increase the risk of sexual recidivism. Data show that residence restrictions lead to financial difficulties, social isolation, homelessness, and feelings of depression and hopelessness for individuals convicted of a sex offense (Jeglic et al., 2012; Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado et al., 2008). Indeed, having buffer zones of up to 2,500 feet can drastically limit the amount available housing to registered sex offenders, particularly in urban areas (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004). Zandbergen and Hart (2006) found that 95% of residential options in Florida were located within 1,000 feet of a school, park, daycare center, or school bus stop, and 99.7% were located within 2,500 feet. In Newark, New Jersey, researchers found that 93% of residences are located within 2,500 feet of schools (Chajewski & Mercado, 2008). As a

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result of these restrictions, many offenders report being unable to live with family, and often have to live further from employment opportunities (Levenson & Hern, 2007). This lack of stability makes reintegration in the community more difficult for registered sex offenders, and puts them at an increased risk to reoffend (Hanson & Harris, 1998). Taken together, research suggests that residence restrictions may inadvertently do more harm than good in terms of community safety.

### **Public Perceptions of Sex Offenders**

It is argued that the driving force behind residence restriction statutes has been pressure from the public (Mancini et al., 2010). Public support for this legislation has persevered despite evidence suggesting their limited utility in reducing sex crimes (Levenson et al., 2007; Mancini et al., 2010). As a result of these laws, many people report increased feelings of safety, while others feel more anxious (Phillips, 1998). Those who reported feeling more secure did so because they believed that community notification procedures forced sex offenders to act in more prosocial ways than if they were not publicly identified. Others who reported feeling anxious, however, indicated that they felt generally uncomfortable knowing that a convicted sex offender lived in their community (Phillips, 1998).

Differing levels of support for sex offender policies have been associated with factors such as parental status, gender, and political affiliation (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Mancini et al., 2010). Mancini and colleagues (2010) found that parents were significantly more likely than people without children to support residence restriction laws. Presumably, the stereotypes of people who are convicted of sex crimes instill fear in parents who want to protect their children, therefore increasing their support for “get tough” policies (Zgoba, 2004). Indeed, research has

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found that parents reported increased levels of fear and anger if a sex offender moved into their neighborhood (Koon-Mangin, 2015). Overall, evidence suggests that people who are more fearful of people convicted of a sex crime are more likely to support sex offender policies (Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009). Levenson and colleagues (2007) found that women are both more likely to report fear of a sex offender living nearby and to agree with sex offender legislation. Political conservatism has also been found to predict punitiveness against those convicted of a sex offense (Pickett, Mancini, & Mears, 2013). It has been theorized that because people of a conservative political orientation generally hold traditional family values, they believe that sexual assault against young victims debases family structures (Lynch, 2002). This view may motivate conservatives to resort to extreme measures to protect victims, and by proxy, the purity of family (Lynch, 2002). Overall, there is strong public support for residence restrictions, with studies reporting more than an 80% approval rating (Mancini et al., 2010). In a showing of unwavering support, research has found that the public still supports the use of community protection laws even in light of evidence that shows they are largely ineffective (Levenson et al., 2007).

### **Influence of Media**

According to a recent estimate by the Nielsen Company (2017), adults in the United States spend more than 10 hours per day consuming various forms of media (e.g., radio, television, internet). Similarly, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2009), children and adolescents spend upward of 6 hours using media. Given the amount of time spent using media, it is unsurprising that the media impacts the opinions and actions of the general public (Huesmann, 2007). Indeed, research has found that exposure to violent media content

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increases the likelihood of aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Anderson et al., 2010; Bender, Plante, & Gentile, 2017). More specifically, findings suggest that there are both short-term effects, such as increased levels of arousal, and long-term effects, such as desensitization or a change in schemas, as a result of prolonged violent media exposure (Adachi & Willoughby, 2011; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann, 2006).

Given the magnitude of media use, support for sex crime legislation may be rooted in stereotypical images of sex offenders created by sensationalized media reporting (Budd & Mancini, 2016; Levenson et al., 2007). The media's sensationalized reporting on sex crimes against children leads people to believe that sex offenders are a homogenous group that pose a high risk to citizens and are unable to be treated (Levenson et al., 2007). This, in turn, prompts the public to believe that there is a need for punitive sanctions for people convicted of sex crimes (Comartin et al., 2009).

As is typical with moral panics, residence restrictions did not emerge because of an increase in sex crimes against children, but rather due to increased attention and worry (Zgoba, 2004). However, media portrayals about the prevalence of sex crimes may be biased. A study that analyzed articles related to sexual offending in three major newspapers over the course of one year found that roughly one-quarter of the articles focused on only nine cases (Thakker & Durant, 2006). Similarly, evidence suggests that the media present an exaggerated image of the incidence of sex crimes, particularly offenses against children (Dowler, 2006). Indeed, media descriptions of sex crimes tend to focus on serious but rare cases (Cheit, 2003; Shelby & Hatch, 2014; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999). Similarly, Thakker and Durant (2006) found that public safety from sex offenders was most frequently covered in newspapers, while information about offender rehabilitation was the least covered.

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Because many people rely on the media as their primary source of information, it is not surprising that the media can influence people's thoughts and behaviors (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994). Malinen and colleagues (2014) examined how informative news about sex crimes influenced public attitudes toward sex offenders, and found that news portraying empirically sound information was related to more positive attitudes toward sex offenders. Given the lack of empirical support and the potential iatrogenic consequences of residence restrictions, it stands to reason that if policies are created based on sensationalized media, they may be ineffective in promoting comprehensive community safety (Galeste, Fradella, & Vogel, 2012).

Budd and Mancini (2016) examined public perceptions of residence restrictions in the context of media use, religion, parental status, and belief in sex offender myths. Results indicated that being Catholic and a parent was related to an increased perception in the efficacy of residence restrictions. News media was reported to be a primary source of sex offender information, yet contrary to their hypothesis, it was not significantly related to support for residence restrictions. Researchers speculated that the vague concept of "news media" may have undermined the role media plays in forming public opinion.

### **Current Study**

The current study aims to extend the findings of Budd and Mancini (2016) to examine the role of media consumption on public perception of the efficacy of residence restrictions. In assessing the role of media in moral panics, Budd and Mancini (2016) conducted a survey using public opinion polls. However, they did not control for the type of news media participants consumed, so it is possible that some participants relied on more conservative news sources, with others relying on more liberal sources. This study will experimentally assess the influence of

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news media on public perception of sexual offending and the efficacy of residence restrictions. Given previous evidence indicating the influence of media in public attitudes (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994), the hypothesis is twofold: (1) People who are exposed to sensationalized media reports will be more likely to hold inaccurate beliefs about people convicted of a sex offense than those who are exposed to informed media reports and those exposed to no media, (2) People who are exposed to sensationalized media will be more likely to believe that residence restrictions are effective in reducing sex crimes than those who are exposed to informed media or no media reports.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

This study utilized an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a no media exposure (control) group, a sensationalized media exposure group, and an informed media exposure group. Analyses assessed for differences among groups in perception of sex offenders and support for residence restrictions. In this study, support for residence restrictions was defined as whether the participant perceived residence restrictions as effective in reducing sexual reoffending.

#### **Participants**

Participants included 233 men, women, and transgender individuals recruited online via the social media website reddit.com. Of the 233 participants, data from 88 were excluded as they failed to respond to questions on both the perceptions of sex offenders and the efficacy of residence restrictions, leaving a final sample of one hundred forty-five participants. Of the 145 participants, 47 were in the No Media group, 46 were in the Sensationalized Media group, and 52 were in the Informed Media group. The age of the sample ranged from 18 to 62 years, with an

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average age of 26.58 (SD = 7.68). Forty-nine (33.6%) of participants were male, 82 (56.2%) were female, and 4 (2.7%) were transgender. Of the 145 participants, 115 (78.8%) reported being White, 7 (4.8%) were African American, 10 (6.8%) were Hispanic, 3 (2.1%) were Asian, and 2 (1.4%) identified as “other.” Six (4.1%) participants had at least one child, 9 (6.2%) had two or more children, and 115 (78.8%) had no children.

### **Procedure**

Prior to beginning the survey, participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the study. Because the experiment was conducted online, participants reviewed the consent form and were encouraged to email the principal investigator if they had any questions. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, participants clicked “yes” and moved on to the study. The experiment was completed completely online via a link posted on reddit.com’s Sample Size page. Participants clicked the link to the experiment on SurveyMonkey. Each participant was randomly assigned to a group via SurveyMonkey’s random assignment feature. Participants in the media exposure groups were first shown either the news clip and article or the editorial piece, then answered questions about sexual offending and people who commit sex crimes. The questions were randomly arranged to reduce priming effects. The items were ordered the exact way they are reported in Appendix C.

### **Materials**

**Media Exposure.** To assess the influence of media, participants were randomly assigned to three different media exposure groups. Those in the control group did not get any media exposure, while participants in the sensationalized media exposure group were shown one news clip and one new article about a sex crimes against children, and participants in the informed media exposure group were shown a newspaper editorial providing the pros and cons of sex

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offender residence restrictions. Individuals in the sensationalized media exposure group watched a news clip from ABC Eyewitness News about a young boy who was kidnapped walking home from school by a registered sex offender and a short news article from *The New York Times* about a child molester who had assaulted his 15th victim (See Appendices A and B).

**Public Perceptions of Sex Offenders.** To assess the accuracy of knowledge about sex offenders, sex crimes, and recidivism, participants were given 10 statements and asked to indicate an answer that best represented their belief. Answers on the scale ranged from 0 to 100%. The mean response was then tabulated. Statements included topics such as sexual reoffending (e.g., “What percentage of sex offenders reoffend with another sex crime?”) and sex offender stereotypes (e.g., “What percentage of sex offenders kill their victims?”).

**Efficacy of Residence Restrictions.** Participants were asked to rate how effective they believe residence restrictions are in reducing sex crimes (e.g., “How effective is prohibiting convicted sex offenders from living near areas where children congregate in preventing offenders from committing a new sex crime?”). Answers on this item were scored from 0-100%.

**Demographics.** Demographic information was collected. This included variables such as age, gender, race, marital status, parental status, education, political affiliation, religion, and income.

## Results

### Descriptives

Overall sample perceptions as well as group differences are presented in Table 1. As a whole, the participants believed that more than 50% of sex offenders reoffend with another sex crime and approximately 45% can be successfully treated. Similarly, participants

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believed that 40% of children are at an increased risk of being victimized by sex offenders who live near areas such as schools or playgrounds. Participants also believed that approximately 60% of child sexual abusers know their victims.

In general, participants in the sensationalized media group held stereotypical opinions about sex offenders. As a group, participants believed that about 62% of sex offenders reoffend with another sex crime and approximately 38% of sex offenders can be successfully treated. They believed that 56% of children are an increased risk of victimization by sex offenders who live near areas where children congregate. They also believed that approximately 50% of child sexual abusers know their victims.

Individuals in the informed media group had less stereotypical views. Participants in this group believed that about 42% of sex offenders reoffend with another sex crime, while approximately 50% can be successfully treated. They believed that more than 75% of child sexual abusers know their victims, and also believed that about 25% of children are at an increased risk of being victimized by sex offenders who live near areas such as schools or playgrounds.

Participants in the no media exposure group held viewpoints somewhat in the middle between the sensationalized group and the informed group. This group believed that approximately 42% of children are at increased risk of being victimized by sex offenders who live in prohibited areas. They believed that about 50% of sex offenders reoffend with another sex crime, and they believed that about 45% of sex offenders can be successfully treated. They also believed that about 60% of child sexual abusers know their victims.

### **Analysis of Variance**

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A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparing the intensity of media exposure (i.e., no media, informed media, sensationalized media) on the perception of sex offenders revealed no statistically significant differences between groups on belief of sex offender myths,  $F(2, 142) = 1.59, p = .21, \eta^2 = .02$ . Separate ANOVAs were also run for each of the ten individual perception questions. Of the ten items, three emerged with significant differences between groups as determined by one-way ANOVAs: sexual recidivism,  $F(2,142) = 8.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ , the percentage of child sexual abusers that know their victims  $F(2,141) = 12.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ , and risk of victimization by sex offenders living near areas where children typically congregate,  $F(2,141) = 14.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ . For the perception that sex offenders are likely to reoffend with another sex crime, Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed that individuals in the sensational media group believed that sex offenders sexually recidivate at higher rates ( $M = 62.35, SD = 23.56$ ) than individuals in the informed media group ( $M = 41.85, SD = 28.59$ ). For the offender-victim relationship, Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed that the informed media group ( $M = 77.12, SD = 18.13$ ) was more likely than both the sensational ( $M = 51.18, SD = 28.88$ ) and no media ( $M = 59.23, SD = 30.01$ ) groups to believe that a higher percentage of child sexual abusers know their victims. Lastly, Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that individuals in the sensational media group ( $M = 56.22, SD = 27.60$ ) were more likely than both the informed ( $M = 25.71, SD = 29.00$ ) and no media ( $M = 41.91, SD = 28.22$ ) groups to believe that a higher percentage of children are at an increased risk of being victimized by sex offenders who live near areas where children congregate. Although not statistically significant, the perception of successful sex offender treatment approached significance,  $F(2,139) = 2.80, p = .06, \eta^2 = .04$ , such that individuals in the sensational media group believed

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that a lower percentage of sex offenders can be successfully treated compared to the informed and no media groups. Overall, these results provide partial support for hypothesis 1.

A second ANOVA was then conducted comparing the intensity of media exposure on perceived effectiveness of residence restrictions. Analyses revealed significant differences between groups on support for residence restrictions  $F(2, 141) = 23.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$ . Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that participants in the sensationalized media exposure group were more likely to believe that residence restrictions are effective in reducing future sex crimes ( $M = 54.89, SD = 20.98$ ) than participants in the informed media exposure group ( $M = 22.13, SD 20.98$ ), and participants in the no media group ( $M = 43.50, SD = 27.58$ ), supporting hypothesis 2.

### Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of media exposure on public perceptions of sex offenders and the efficacy of residence restrictions in reducing future sex crimes. Research indicates that the media influences people's thoughts and behaviors (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994), a finding that was partially supported by the results of the present study. In this sample, participants who were randomly assigned to the sensationalized media exposure group endorsed more stereotypical views of sex offenders in certain domains and reported higher levels of support for residence restrictions compared to participants with informed media exposure. These results suggest that the accuracy of news media shape the opinions of those who consume it.

Overall, the participants held somewhat inaccurate beliefs of sex offenders. Specifically, people overestimated rates of sexual recidivism. Across all three groups, participants believed that an average of 42% to 62% of sex offenders would reoffend with another sex crime. In

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actuality, research has found that the average rate of sexual recidivism is 13.7% over a period of approximately 5 to 6 years (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Schmucker & Losel, 2015), suggesting that the likelihood of sex offenders committing a new sex offense is low. Participants were, however, somewhat more accurate in their perception of the percentage of child sexual abusers who know their victims, with responses ranging between 50% and 77%. Snyder (2000) found that 7% of child sexual assaults reported to law enforcement were perpetrated by a stranger. Similarly, research has found that between 73% and 79% of sex offenders perpetrated against someone they knew. Still, participants had a tendency to underestimate the frequency with which sexual offenders know their victims.

Participants reported perceived rates of successful treatment ranged between 38% and 50%, suggesting uncertainty regarding the efficacy of sex offender treatment. This uncertainty is reflected in the literature. Early research did not find sex offender treatment to reduce recidivism (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989), however, more recent research has found more promising results. In a meta-analysis, Schmucker and Losel (2015) found that compared to untreated sex offenders, treated sex offenders showed a 26.3% decrease in sexual recidivism. Indeed, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has emerged as the most practiced model for sex offender treatment, and the current literature supports this methodology for treatment (McGrath, Cumming, Burchard, Zeoli, & Ellerby, 2010; Schmucker & Losel, 2015).

Taken together, these results suggest that perhaps the public thinks residence restrictions are an effective strategy is because they believe that offenders are bound to reoffend and may not respond well to treatment (Budd & Mancini, 2016; Levenson et al., 2007; Socia & Haris, 2016). This may lead them to believe that an effective strategy to manage these offenders is by physically prohibiting them from residing in areas that present them with opportunities to

reoffend (Levenson & Hearn, 2007; Mancini et al., 2010).

### **Policy Implications**

Overall, the findings of the current study suggest that the public is fairly misinformed when it comes to sexual offending and the efficacy of residence restrictions. Given that legislative development often occurs at the behest of the public (Mancini et al., 2010), this is especially problematic. Public policy should be created on the basis of accurate and empirically supported information about sexual offending. In reality, base rates of sexual reoffending vary (5% to 19%; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003), indicating that people who commit sexual offenses vary in the risk they pose to society (Hanson & Busisiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). Therefore, it is unlikely that a single policy to manage people convicted of a sex crime would be effective in its goal of public safety.

Risk assessment tools have been developed to classify offenders in terms of their recidivism risk (Hanson & Thornton, 1999). By identifying offenders with the highest risk to reoffend, community management strategies may be curtailed for lower risk offenders while reserving more intensive methods for those who are high risk. For instance, utilizing the principles of the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model may help ensure that offenders are getting the appropriate level of intervention (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Briefly, the RNR treatment model dictates that offenders with the highest risk of recidivism should receive the most intense services while simultaneously addressing criminogenic needs of the offender receiving treatment. This way, treatment services are specific to the needs of the individual receiving them. This may be particularly important because research has shown that residence restrictions are associated with a number of collateral consequences that may increase the risk of sexual

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reoffending (Jeglic et al., 2012; Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado et al., 2008). By limiting affordable housing options, those convicted of a sex crime may be forced to live separately from supportive family members or further from employment opportunities, thus increasing rather than decreasing their risk for recidivism (Jeglic et al., 2012; Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado et al., 2008).

If the public utilizes the media as a primary source of information about people who commit sexual offenses, legislators should encourage the media to focus on accurate portrayals of sex crimes rather than rare and sensational crimes. The media has largely focused on images of sex offenders as men who are strangers to their victims who continue to reoffend even after they have been caught (Socia & Harris, 2016). By focusing on these rare sex crimes, the media may influence people to be wary of strangers, when in reality, most people who commit sexual offenses victimize someone they already know (Colombino & Mercado, 2009; Duwe et al., 2008; Greenfield, 1997). The public would benefit from empirically supported reports regarding statistics of sex crimes and characteristics of perpetrators who commit a range of sexual offenses. Public education may help quell some of the fears that people have about sex offenders and allow for more informed discussions about strategies to reduce victimization.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The current study had some limitations that should be noted. Although it was an experimental design, participants in the two media exposure groups were exposed to two different forms of media. The sensationalized media group both viewed a news clip and read an article, whereas the informed media group only read an article. Research has found that the type of psychoeducational intervention provided (e.g., read an article, view a presentation, presentation with discussion) influences the extent of attitude change about the treatment of

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individuals convicted of a sex offense (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012). Therefore, it is possible that the type of news medium could have influenced participant's opinions of the content being reported. Future research should utilize the same form of media in assessing the influence of media exposure on opinions of individuals convicted of a sex offense.

Similarly, the current study did not use media outlets with different political viewpoints. Research has suggested that consumers may be biased by partisan news sources, as they often present information consistent with one viewpoint (Della Vigna & Gentzkow, 2010). Therefore, future research should assess the influence of news reports from different media outlets, such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, or *Fox News*, on perceptions of sex offenders. Similarly, there are no known studies that have examined the influence of news stories disseminated via social media on perceptions of sex offenders. Given the growth of social media use in the last decade, future research may assess the influence and perceived accuracy of news stories shared on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter.

Despite efforts to control the length and duration of the news stories, it is possible that participants did not completely read or watch the news. Because this study utilized a sample recruited from the Internet, it is possible that participants skimmed the articles or did not pay full attention to the news clip. The current study did not have a manipulation check, so it is possible that participants did not fully view the media content presented and relied solely on their preconceived notions regarding sexual offenders. Future research may benefit from either including a manipulation check or administering the experiment in-person.

The current study did not inquire about the participant's prior knowledge and views about individuals convicted of a sexual offense. It is possible that participants had prior knowledge

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about sexual offending, and that the media articles provided were not the only source from which participants based their responses. Similarly, this study did not inquire about participants' experiences with individuals convicted of sex offenses. Because research has found that victimization status influences opinions about perpetrators (Button, Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Payne, 2013), future research should inquire about sexual assault experiences. Similarly, this study did not inquire about the extent of participants' media exposure. If participants had previous prolonged exposure to sensationalized forms of media, it is possible that exposure to one article may not have been enough to influence or change their opinions. Similarly, it is possible that the effects garnered from the articles presented during the study were due to a recency effect. Indeed, research has found increased levels of aggressive thoughts and emotions up to four minutes following violent media exposure (Adachi & Willoughby, 2011). Therefore, future research should inquire about the extent of participants' media consumption and should also consider delaying survey administration following violent media exposure.

Lastly, another limitation of this study may have been the definition of the term "sex offender." This term is vague and can potentially mislead the public into thinking of people who commit sexual offenses in stereotypical ways. Future research should assess the impact of media differences when using the more accurate label "person who committed a sexual offense."

### **Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, the study reveals that the media does play a role in shaping public perception about sex offenders and the efficacy of residence restrictions. Increased exposure to sensationalized media leads people to believe some inaccurate information regarding sexual offenders and support policies that are largely ineffective in reducing future sex crimes. As public opinion influences the formation of legislation, these results highlight the importance

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of more accurate and factual news reporting. In doing so, government funds can be allocated for prevention strategies that have empirical support in reducing future sex crimes.

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Table 1

*Perceptions of Offenders*

	No Media	Informed	Sensational	Total		
	<i>n</i> = 47	<i>n</i> = 52	<i>n</i> = 47	<i>n</i> = 145		
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>F</i> (df = 2)	$\eta^2$
Percentage of general recidivism	40.04 (20.66)	37.35 (20.38)	43.30 (23.64)	40.08 (21.54)	0.899	0.01
Percentage of successful treatment	45.76 (23.48)	49.65 (24.96)	37.65 (24.90)	44.36 (24.76)	2.80	0.04
Percentage of children at risk	41.91 (28.22) b,c	27.71 (29.00) a,c	56.22 (28.22) a,b	40.74 (30.80)	14.11*	0.09
Percentage of sex offenders who kill	14.00 (14.34)	14.31 (18.39)	18.33 (16.51)	15.48 (16.56)	0.99	0.01
Percentage of known relationship	59.23 (30.01) b	77.12 (18.13)a, c	51.18 (28.88)b	63.17 (28.01)	12.86*	0.15
Percentage of use of force	33.30 (21.86)	30.73 (26.30)	40.02 (23.90)	34.51 (24.31)	1.89	0.03
Percentage that sexually recidivate	51.89 (21.88)	41.85 (28.59)c	62.35 (23.56)b	51.61 (26.21)	8.22*	0.10
Percentage that are male	78.38 (12.60)	77.21 (12.54)	78.38 (15.66)	78.81 (13.62)	1.01	0.01
Percentage abused as children	46.96 (27.77)	45.18 (29.38)	41.39 (29.07)	44.53 (28.64)	0.45	0.01
Percentage of effectiveness	43.50 (25.39)b	22.12 (20.98)a, c	54.89 (25.81)b	39.43 (27.59)	23.65*	0.25

*Note.* Different subscripts indicate significant differences in Bonferroni post hoc comparisons

\*  $p < .001$

## Appendix A

## ABC Eyewitness News Clip

The ABC Eyewitness news clip outlines the story of a 10-year old boy who was approached by a stranger on the street. Soon after, the boy was then taken and put in a van. The boy was able to escape from the basement apartment of his captor, who turned out to be a registered sex offender.

## Appendix B

*New York Times* article

The newspaper clip from *The New York Times* outlines the story of a child molester who was just arrested after attacking his 15th child victim. The victim was a 9-year old girl from Queens, New York. The perpetrator fondled the young girl in the lobby of her apartment building. All of the perpetrator's victims were between the ages of 8 and 13 and were attacked while they were on their way home from school.

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## Appendix C

## Perceptions of sex offenders survey

What percentage of sex offenders reoffend with a non-sex crime?

What percentage of sex offenders can be successfully treated?

What percentage of children are at an increased risk of being victimized by sex offenders who live near schools and playgrounds?

What percentage of sex offenders kill their victims?

What percentage of child sexual abusers know their victims?

What percentage of sexual abusers use force or violence to get children to comply?

What percentage of sex offenders reoffend with another sex crime?

What percentage of sex offenders are male?

What percentage of sex offenders were abused as children?

How effective is prohibiting sex offenders from living near areas where children congregate in reducing sex crimes against children?