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How Sex Offenders are Causing Unneeded Moral Panic in the Current Day

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Background Information

Moral panic is defined as a feeling of fear spread throughout the community by something that is viewed as "deviant" or evil. A national response of community members to the "folk devil" threat. The elements of concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Classically characterized by haphazard or knee-jerk solutions (Cohen, 2002). Most often, a moral panic is caused when a problem is relevant to the community followed by extreme media attention (Jenkins, 2004). Moral panics seem to exist in regards to sexual offenders and the legislation crafted to form and advance sex offender registration and community notification efforts. Research conducted by Burchfield and colleagues assumed that the panic was already occurring and instead sought to determine why the panic was not fading like other moral panics (2014). The media coverage 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).

Methodology

Sample
• Convenience sample of community members recruited through Amazon's MTurk in October 2013
• Participants were offered a \$1 incentive (redeemable at Amazon.com) to complete an online survey (administered through Qualtrics) which took between 15-30 minutes to complete.
• 877 participants completed surveys and resided in all fifty states across the country. 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 regressions analyses used in this presentation. Gender was not included in this analysis due to multicollinearity issues with the parental status variable. Furthermore, as the specific focus of the study centered on differences between parents and those participants without children, the decision was made to only include the parental status variable. No other multicollinearity issues existed between the control variables, or between the control variables and the dependent variable; all VIF values were below 1.5 for these variables.

Measures

Independent Variables.
Registry Support, Strictness and Prior Searches.
• "Do you support the use of your state's publicly available sex offender registry system in its current form?" Most participants reported that they definitely did support their state's registry system in its current form (46.9%).
• "How strict do you think the current laws are concerning your state's sex offender registry system?" Most frequently, participants reported are "just right" (40.3%).
• "How many times have you searched your state's sex offender registry website for sex offenders living in the areas nearby your home?" 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%).
• "How many sex offenders would you estimate are living nearby your home? Participants most frequently reported that they believed 0-5 sex offenders lived nearby their homes (n=603, 68.8%)."

Registry Knowledge Variable. Ten items were used to measure registry knowledge, with all items using a 5-point Likert Scale with response options ranging from (1) Very True to (5) Very False. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions, framed in the context of "Thinking about the sex offender registry system in general, please answer the following questions. In most states:
1) All sex offenders are classified the same no matter what their crime (False)*
2) Some registered sex offenders are required to live at least 1,000 feet from a school zone, park, or bus stop (True)
3) Some sex offenders are required to register for life (True)
4) Juvenile sex offenders, who are at least 14 years at the time of the offense, can be placed on the registry if convicted (True)
5) All sex offenders are required to be on some sort of electronic monitoring/GPS tracking device at all times (False)*
6) Sex offenders have very high rates of reoffending (False)*
7) The Amber Alert system is named after a child named Amber; it has nothing to do with the color amber (True)
8) There are more registered male sex offenders than there are registered female sex offenders (True)
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)
10) After serving their prison sentences, sex offenders can be incarcerated indefinitely through a process called Civil Commitment (True). The mean score for this count variable was 4.50.

Stereotypical Sex Offender Variable. 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. 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. Participants were the most successful in correctly identifying the gender, race, and ethnicity of the offender. The mean score for the Stereotypical Sex Offender count variable was 4.55.

Moral Panic Variables. To measure the five elements of a moral panic—concern, hostility, consensus, volatility, and disproportionality—original variables used 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). The five elements of moral panics are operationalized as follows.

Concern Scale: 5 items loaded on to one factor (Cronbach's alpha = .841).
Hostility Scale: 5 items loaded on to one factor (Cronbach's alpha = .812).
Consensus Scale: 5 items loaded on to one factor (Cronbach's alpha = .915).
Volatility Scale: 5 items loaded on to one factor (Cronbach's alpha = .852).
Disproportionality Scale: 4 items loaded on to one factor (Cronbach's alpha = .835).
*5 original scales were created each linked to moral panic, we cannot operationalize due to space constraints. However, a full list is available upon request.

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 that they agree (4) with the above statement (n=293, 33.4%).

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 participant perceived reduction in sex offender recidivism. Before the analyses were conducted, the data was assessed for missing variables.

Independent sample t-tests and chi-square analyses were conducted to see if there were any statistically significant mean differences between group characteristics in regard to the dependent variable. There was no significant mean difference for the parental status, 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.

Bivariate correlations were then conducted to examine which independent variables were related to the outcome of interest, participant support for the sex offender registry. This was necessary before the multivariate regressions could be performed. Table 1 (discussed below) shows any significant correlations that exist between the independent and dependent variables.

Due to the categorical of the dependent variable, the use of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was an appropriate choice for the multivariate regression used in this study. For this study, three OLS regression analyses were used to account for any potential mediation that occurred after the stepwise introduction of the control variables (Model A), registry strictness, search and knowledge variables (Model B), and the theoretical predictors of a moral panic (Model C) to the existing variables present in the previous models.

Table 1. Correlation Coefficients for Bivariate Relationship with Perceived Reduction in Recidivism.

	Perceived Reduction in Recidivism	
	Coefficient	Significance
Parent Status (Parent)	.008	NS
Age	-.147	***
Race (White)	-.212	***
Ethnicity (Hispanic)	-.013	NS
Education Level (College Degree)	-.011	NS
Population Size	-.044	NS
Geographic Region (South)	-.043	NS
Registry Support	.024	NS
Registry Strictness	-.057	NS
Search for Sex Offenders	-.083	*
Estimated Number of Sex Offenders	-.066	NS
Registry Knowledge	-.036	NS
Stereotypical Sex Offender	-.170	***
Concern	.124	***
Hostility	.126	***
Consensus	-.006	NS
Volatility	-.089	***
Disproportionality	-.314	***

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Multivariate Regression Analyses

Model A began the stepwise analysis approach by using control variables to predict participant perceptions regarding reductions in sex offender recidivism. For this model, a total of 6.4% of the model variance was explained by the predictor variables (F(2,875) = 8.24, p < .001). Of the six control variables, age, race, education level and population size were significant. This indicates that younger individuals (b = -.05, p < .01), black participants (b = -.36, p < .001), those with a college degree (b = .16, p < .05), and those living in areas with smaller populations (b = -.07, p < .05) were more likely to perceive the sex offender registry is effective in reducing sex offender recidivism.

In Model B, the registry support, search and knowledge variables were added to the control variables introduced in Model A. For this model, a total of 8.8% of the variance was explained by the predictor variables (F(2,875) = 6.16, p < .001). Of the control variables, only age, race and education level remained significant, with population size being mediated out of the model. This indicates that younger individuals (b = -.05, p < .01), black participants (b = -.31, p < .001), and those with a college degree (b = .16, p < .05) were more likely to perceive the sex offender registry as being effective in reducing sex offender recidivism. Four of the six registry support, search and knowledge variables—registry support, registry strictness, estimated number of sex offenders, and stereotypical sex offender—were significant with a p-value at or below .05. These results suggest that those individuals who do support the registry in its current form (b = .12, p < .01), who believe the registry is more strict than it is (b = .12, p < .01), those who estimate a larger number of sex offenders living near their homes (b = .01, p < .01), and those who identified less accurate profiles of the stereotypical sex offender (b = .05, p < .05), were more likely to perceive the sex offender registry as being effective in reducing sex offender recidivism. As one of the previously significant control variables were mediated by the introduction of the registry support, search and knowledge variables, H4 was partially supported.

In Model C, the moral panic variables were added to the control variables and the registry support, search and knowledge variables introduced in Models A and B. For this model, a total of 24.4% of the variance was explained by the predictor variables (F(2,875) = 19.88, p < .001). Of the control variables, age, race and education level remained significant, but were partially mediated by the introduction of the moral panic variables. Once again, younger individuals (b = -.04, p < .05), black participants (b = -.21, p < .01), and those with a college degree (b = .15, 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 remained significant after the introduction of the moral panic variables. The other three variables from this group were completely mediated from the model. This indicates that those individuals who support the registry in its current form (b = .11, p < .01) are more likely to perceive the registry as being effective in reducing sex offender recidivism levels.

Finally, only two of the five moral panic measures were significant predictors of participants' perceptions of registry effectiveness in reducing sex offender recidivism: Concern, consensus, and disproportionality all lacked statistical significance. Those participants who felt more hostility toward sex offenders (b = .12, p < .05) and who believed that a volatile response toward sex offenders was occurring (b = .68, p < .001) were more likely to believe that the sex offender registry was effective in reducing sex offender recidivism levels. As all previously significant variables from Models A (control variables) and B (registry knowledge) were either completely or partially mediated by the inclusion of the moral panic measures, H5 was supported. Although only two of the five moral panic measures were significant, they carried a large amount of statistical weight and were the driving variables in Model C. These two variables were also consistent in terms of directionality, as seen in the examination of previously literature. When community members exhibit anger toward sex offenders (hostility) and believe that efforts to contain the problem are 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 SOIRN legislation was implemented properly, wasn't hastily put together, and is meeting its legislative objectives, then these laws have to be effective in reducing recidivism levels. The sex offender registry serves as a control mechanism, 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 increasing (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. Previous research suggests that not only will community members support continued efforts to contain the threat that sex offenders pose, but may support increasing punitive response against this offender group as well (Klein & Cooper, In Press). Table 4 shows the results of all three OLS regression analyses.

Table 4. OLS Regression Models Predicting Perceived Reduction in Recidivism

Variable	Model A			Model B			Model C		
	b	SE	B	b	SE	B	b	SE	B
Parent Status (Parent)	.05	.08	.03	.07	.08	.03	.00	.08	.0
Age	-.05	-.11	-.11	-.05	-.11	-.11	.04	-.02	-.0
Race (White)	-.36	-.07	-.17	-.31	-.08	-.15	.21	-.08	-.1
Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic)	-.04	.01	-.01	-.00	.01	-.01	.00	.00	.0
Education Level (College Degree)	.16	.07	.08	.16	.07	.08	.15	.07	.0
Population Size	-.05	.03	-.07	-.05	.03	-.06	.03	.03	.0
Geographic Region (South)	-.07	.07	-.03	-.06	.07	-.03	.05	.07	.0
Registry Support				.12	-.04	.10	.11	-.04	.0
Registry Strictness				-.08	-.04	-.07	-.07	.04	.0
Search for Sex Offenders				-.11	.07	-.05	-.10	.07	.0
Estimated Number of Sex Offenders				.01	-.00	.09	.01	.00	.0
Registry Knowledge				.00	.02	.01	.00	.02	.0
Stereotypical Sex Offender				-.05	.03	-.07	-.03	.03	.0
Concern							.05	.06	.0
Hostility							.12	.06	.0
Consensus							-.12	.07	.0
Disproportionality							-.11	.08	.0
Volatility							.68	-.09	.0
Constant	3.56		12	3.72		21	1.94		36
F Statistic	8.24***			19.88***			19.88***		