

ANALYZING CRIMINAL JUSTICE STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUAL
OFFENDERS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
LIST OF TABLES	6
ABSTRACT	7
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	3
III. UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF SEXUAL OFFENDER LEGISLATION.....	7
IV. AIM OF THE STUDY.....	9
V. METHODOLOGY	11
VI. RESULTS	18
VII. DISCUSSION	22
VIII. CONCLUSION	29
APPENDIX SECTION	31
APPENDIX A – CATSO INSTRUMENT	31
REFERENCES	33

LIST OF TABLES

Figures	Page
1. Descriptive Statistics Of Dependent And Independent Variables	15
2. One-Way ANOVA Results For Group Differences In SO Attitudes	20
3. Independent Samples T-Test Results For Group Differences In SO Attitudes	21

ABSTRACT

Numerous studies within the criminal justice (CJ) field have evaluated public attitudes towards sexual offenders to investigate whether they are disproportionately vilified as compared to other criminal groups. Generally, these studies have found that public perceptions of sex offenders are misconstrued (Corabian, 2021). A dire consequence of such beliefs is that unfounded stigmas misguide public opinions to enact harsh and discriminatory laws that may perpetuate criminality. For example, it has been acknowledged elsewhere that strict sex offender legislation is counterproductive to community safety as harsh restrictions stigmatize and prevent societal reintegration of sex offenders. Although numerous studies have evaluated public perceptions towards sex offenders, few studies have analyzed the perceptions of students, especially those who have a CJ focus. As CJ students begin their career paths, evaluating their attitudes towards sexual offenders may provide insight into future policies and approaches to working with sexual offenders by those most likely to work in this field. Using a sample of 98 undergraduate CJ students from Texas State University, this study explores attitudes towards sexual offenders using the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements & Sun, 2008). Differences in attitudes are then investigated based on participants' sociodemographic information, educational levels, political affiliations, past/current enrollment within a sex offender class, and the intended career paths. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Sex Offenders; Perceptions; Attitudes; CJ Students; Careers

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally, the term ‘sex crimes’ encapsulates a wide range of behaviors that are sexual and deemed to be criminal (Grossi, 2017). The current *Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act* defines sex crime as “a criminal offense that has an element involving a sexual act or sexual contact with another” (34 U.S.C. § 20911 (5)(a)(1)). This broad definition reflects this crime type’s ambiguity and contributes to vague interpretations. Therefore, individuals have difficulties acknowledging the numerous sex crimes that individuals get charged with including child pornography, indecent exposure, and voyeurism (“14 most common sex crimes”, 2021). To gain more information on sexual crimes, the media become a main source of information to aid public understanding (Corabian, 2021). However, the media may contribute to misleading public perceptions of sex offenders by exaggerating sexual crime figures and sensationalizing extreme cases (Malinen, Willis, & Johnston, 2014). These embellished depictions, then, contribute to grouping sex offenders into a one-dimensional, fear-mongering category. Therefore, individuals may rely on stigmas and sex offender stereotypes to frame their understanding of sexual crimes.

Wurtele (2021b) informs how inaccurate public assumptions are damaging because voters then pressure legislative bodies to enact punitive and restrictive sex offender policies. However, these policies often become counterproductive and impede sex offender prevention efforts. Wurtele (2021b) explains, for example, that sex offender policies contribute to an increase in public stigma towards sex offenders causing the offenders to develop internalized hatred and emotional instability resulting in dynamic risk factors to commit additional sexual offenses. Sexual crime is a comprehensive

criminal category that encompasses complexities beyond sexual stereotypes.

Relying on moral panics and sensationalized media can result in skewed public attitudes affecting sex offender legislation that may diminish rehabilitative efforts. Ensuring proper treatment begins with learning about the public's – and particular subsets of the public's – attitudes towards sexual offenders and researching their motivating factors for these beliefs. A challenge with previous work on this topic is that it has considered the public to be a homogeneous group; however, attitudes towards this type of offender may differ when we begin to research how they vary when focusing on different subgroups. To do so, this exploratory study aims to better understand perceptions toward sexual offenders using data collected from Texas State University undergraduate students majoring in criminal justice (CJ). When we disaggregate the public into smaller groups, we can learn how attitudes towards sex offenders may vary when individuals receive undergraduate education within the CJ field. I am interested in students and CJ majors specifically because these individuals are likely to become CJ practitioners and thus have an increased chance of interacting with sex offenders in the future. Therefore, understanding the students' current attitude towards sex offenders aids in assessing how future sex offenders may be viewed/received within the CJ system. First, however, an overview of relevant works of literature regarding attitudes towards sex offenders is needed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have evaluated public perceptions toward sex offenders, and researchers have commonly found that public attitudes are more negative (Willis et al., 2010; Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Mears et al. 2008). For example, Rogers and Ferguson (2011) found that attitudes toward sex offenders were more punitive than nonsexual offenders among undergraduate participants, and rehabilitative attitudes were lower compared to nonsexual offenders. This finding, and other studies evaluating public opinions towards sex offenders (e.g., Craig, 2005), commonly reflect that most individuals' attitudes favor a more punitive stance. These results seem as if changing some of the public's attitudes is unrealistic. However, Kjelsberg and Loos (2008) have identified that public attitudes are different when compared to correctional employees who display significantly more positive attitudes toward sex offenders. This difference in attitudes may be due to the employees' regular contact with sex offenders as compared to individuals who do not have any interaction with them. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest two things: 1) that attitudes towards this population do vary depending on who comprises the sample; and, 2) that public views of sex offenders may be amended if individuals become more exposed to sex offenders and their realities.

Discriminatory attitudes toward sex offenders, at least in part, stem from misinformation. Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, and Baker (2007), for example, assessed whether public perception towards sex offenders was based on empirical evidence or misconceptions. This research affirmed that most participants in this sample were misinformed about sexual crimes due to their reliance on non-empirical evidence. Although Kjelsberg, Loos, and Fortney et al. (2008) provide valuable factors to consider

when assessing what motivates public attitudes towards sex offenders, including exposure to sex offender interactions and/or research, other variables influence public opinions that are also valuable to reflect on.

CJ researchers have identified many influential variables that may impact public views of sex offenders, and numerous research studies utilize undergraduate students as participants to explore these possible factors. For example, some influences identified to negatively affect student attitudes towards sex offenders included their estimated engagement in sensationalized media reporting, evaluating the participants' educational knowledge on sex offender realities, political beliefs, and an individual's personality (see, for example, Malinen, Willis, & Johnston, 2014; Wurtele, 2021b; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017; Olver & Barlow, 2010). Malinen et al., 2014 study explored whether informative sexual offending news reporting decreases negative public attitudes towards sex offenders. The authors found that informative media significantly influenced the participants' cognitive and behavioral attitude components toward sex offenders. Therefore, media can alleviate many punitive attitudes through informative reporting rather than sensationalizing the rarest, and often most horrific, sexual crimes.

Another influential factor includes assessing an individual's knowledge of sex offender education. Wurtele (2021b) evaluated whether completing an educational sex offender course influences previous negative attitudes the participants held before engaging in the program. Wurtele's study demonstrated that the semester-long educational intervention positively influenced students' attitudes towards child sex offenders, corrected stereotypes, reduced support for punitive punishments, and improved attitudes towards treatment. These results present a possibility to alleviate harsh

perspectives on sex offenders when individuals are properly informed. In another study, Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) found that sex offender education and conservative beliefs correlated with strict attitudes toward sex offenders. Significant findings indicated that lacking general sex offender knowledge predicted negative attitudes, and participants with conservative beliefs were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards sex offenders. Attitudes were especially negative when conservative participants lacked proper sex offender knowledge. The researchers' results indicated that education and political affiliation are important variables that need more analysis to identify how to change negative public opinions toward sex offenders.

Lastly, Olver and Barlow (2010) assessed whether personality traits affect societal attitudes towards sex offenders. This study is significant in assessing societal attitude complexities and questioning whether public attitudes regarding sex offenders are difficult to change due to deeper personal characteristics and beliefs. Results demonstrated that most demographic variables did not correlate with attitudes towards sex offenders. However, a considerable finding was that more female participants perceived sexual offenders to have higher sexual offending recidivism rates than did males. Furthermore, characteristics displaying openness and agreeableness provided higher positive attitudes towards rehabilitative-oriented goals, and extraversion characteristics had a negative relationship with systems-related attitudes.

Using these studies as a backdrop, I will evaluate whether similar findings emerge when surveying CJ students specifically. Although numerous studies examined the public and undergraduate students, few have exclusively limited their study to CJ students. This creates a gap in the literature because these individuals have a greater possibility of

working with sex offenders in their future careers. If moral sex offender panics similarly influence CJ undergraduate students as it does with previously evaluated participants, then the probability of punitive sex offender restrictions and practices may remain in place and continue to stigmatize sex offenders in the future. Therefore, if negative attitudes among CJ students are identified in this study, then this may suggest that implementing sexual offender and sexual violence educational courses at the undergraduate-level based on empirical evidence may be helpful in hopes of neutralizing attitudes towards this population among those most likely to work with them in the future.

III. UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF SEXUAL OFFENDER LEGISLATION

Inaccurate assumptions about sex offenders influence judicial decisions regarding sex offender sanctions and management that perpetuate repressive policies. Often, sex offender laws are reactive acts provoked in response to heinous sexual offenses such as with Jacob Wetterling and Megan Kanka. These children were victims of sexual offenses and their deaths ignited public outrage that resulted in the passing of the Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan's Law in the victims' honor. The Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act of 1994 required states to implement a sex offender residency registration system (Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending Registering, and Tracking (SMART, 2015). Megan's Law amended the Wetterling Act and mandated the public disclosure of sex offender registries to notify communities (SMART, 2015). Legislation ratified these notification and registration policies to ease public panic and reassure community safety. However, the policies have been critiqued for inducing unforeseen collateral damage to convicted sex offenders and individuals associated with them. Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) inform that sex offender notification and registration laws may impede community reintegration and can contribute to recidivism. Civil sanctions imposed create invisible punishments that result in reintegration barriers attached to federal convictions and registered sex offender stigmas (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Levenson and Tewksbury detail the apparent and invisible punishments registered sex offenders and their family members commonly endure, including employment limitations, increased financial issues, housing concerns, harassment, and personal endangerment. Although the CJ system serves to punish offenders and protect the community, these measures conflict

with rehabilitation and societal reentry goals. Therefore, changing ineffective and damaging legislation requires the public to acknowledge sex offender realities. To ensure constructive sex offender policies in the future, researchers must evaluate current young adult opinions towards sex offenders, especially among those most likely to work in this field.

Researchers want to evaluate whether student perspectives towards sex offenders have changed from dismissive assumptions to indicating accurate sex offender realities. Students will emerge as influential figures in future voting enactments, and they decide whether to continue supporting current policy or alleviate these scrutinizing legalities. Undergraduates interested in the CJ field are especially significant because they have a higher chance of working with sex offenders and managing issues surrounding sexual crimes. CJ students may hold positions within the courts, corrections, legislation, or law enforcement. Therefore, these undergraduates' perspectives toward sex offenders will affect future interactions with this population (Wiersma, 2016)

IV. AIM OF THE STUDY

Broadly, this study intends to generate a better understanding of public perceptions of sex offenders among those who are likely to become future CJ professionals. It is important to better understand the attitudes of CJ students towards sexual offenders, and how they may differ among these students, since these are the individuals who are more likely to be involved in future policy development and practice with these offenders. Nine hypotheses were created based on previous academic work (as reviewed above), and they will be tested in the current study:

- H₁:** Attitudes toward sexual offenders in a sample of CJ undergraduate students are less punitive.
- H₂:** CJ undergraduate students intending to pursue law enforcement display more punitive attitudes towards sex offenders than other intended career paths.
- H₃:** CJ undergraduate students intending to pursue careers within corrections will display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders than students intending to pursue law enforcement.
- H₄:** CJ undergraduate students intending to pursue careers within the court system will display less punitive attitudes toward sex offenders than other intended career paths.
- H₅:** CJ undergraduate students enrolled in university longer will display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders.
- H₆:** Male CJ undergraduate students will display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders than female CJ students.
- H₇:** CJ undergraduate students' political affiliation will not affect their attitudes towards sex offenders.
- H₈:** CJ undergraduate students with previous and/or current enrollment in a sex offender course will display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders as compared to other participants not currently/previously enrolled.
- H₉:** CJ undergraduate students who are affiliated with sex offenders will display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders as compared to others who are

not affiliated with sex offenders.

V. METHODOLOGY

Participants

In the fall of 2021, 98 Texas State University undergraduate students participated in the CJ Student Attitudes Towards Sexual Offenders survey (IRB no. 8008). This survey was accessible to participants through the Student Research Participation (SONA) platform within the School of Criminal Justice and Criminology. Participants were undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in survey research for the School of Criminal Justice and Criminology's Human Subjects Pool to earn course credit. In the sample, every participant majored in CJ at the time that they participated in the survey.

In terms of sociodemographic information of the sample, there was a total of 64 (65.3%) cisgender women, 29 (29.6%) cisgender men, 1 (1.0%) transgender male, 1 (1.0%) non-binary or genderqueer individual, and 3 (3.1%) participants who identified as "Other." The age of the students ranged from 18 to 53 years, with a mean age of 20.65 years ($SD = 4.54$). The sample was ethnically diverse, with 34 (34.7%) participants identifying as White, 51 (52.0%) being of Hispanic or Spanish Origin, 9 (9.2%) identifying as Black or African American, 2 (2.0%) being of Southeast Asian descent, 1 (1.0%) identifying as Native American, and 1 (1.0%) identifying as a Hawaiian Native or other Pacific Islander. Furthermore, 31 (31.6%) individuals in the sample indicated that they were first-year undergraduates, 23 (23.5%) were in their second year, 28 (28.6%) were in their third year, and 16 (16.3%) were in their fourth year or more of their undergraduate degrees.

Procedure

To progress with this research project, I first applied to the Texas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB assessed the goal of this research, the hypotheses, as well as the survey instrument, and ensured that this project met the ethical standards for human subjects research. On November 3, 2021, I received IRB approval (no. 8008) and consulted with Dr. Hewitt to complete the CJ Human Subjects Pool application form to be able to access the human subject pool on SONA to recruit student participants. IRB protocol required participants to be at least 18 years of age to partake in the survey. Furthermore, because of the nature of the research questions, students needed to have been CJ majors at the time that they took the survey. After having read the description of the study and the potential risks and benefits of their participation, students consented by agreeing to initiate the survey (i.e., waiver of informed consent). The students received 1-course credit for their participation and completion (not extra credit for their participation).

The survey was completely anonymous and it did not collect identifying information from the participants. Because the study required online completion, participants had as much privacy as they would like when they completed the questionnaire. Once participants completed the survey, they were thanked for their participation and they were provided with various online mental health resources (if needed). Once the SONA deadline for participation passed (December 4, 2021), the data were downloaded from Qualtrics and then imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program (v. 27) for cleaning and analysis.

Measures

In the current survey, questions were grouped into two sections: the Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (CATSO) instrument and demographic inquiries.

Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (CATSO; Church et al., 2008)

The CATSO scale is an 18-item model created to build a tailored sex offender measuring instrument that better assesses public attitudes towards sex offenders compared to subjective open-ended self-reports (Church et al., 2008) (please see Appendix A for the 18-items). Furthermore, a six-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree [1], disagree [2], probably disagree [3], probably agree [4], agree [5], and strongly agree [6]” is used to measure participant responses to each of the questions (Church et al., 2008, p. 254). Higher scores indicate more punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders, whereas lower scores suggest less punitive – or more favorable – attitudes towards this offender population. However, the CATSO instrument was revised for this study and adjusted to a five-point Likert scale that included the following options: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither disagree nor agree (neutral) (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5).

Demographics

There were 18 demographic questions included in the survey to try to better understand factors that might account for differences in participants’ attitudes towards sexual offenders. Such factors included the participants’ age (birth year), gender (*1 = cisgender women; 2 = cisgender man; 3 = other*, which includes transgender woman, transgender man, non-binary or genderqueer, two-spirited, other), and race (*1 = White; 2 = Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin; 3 = Black or African American; 4 = Other*, which includes Southeast Asian (Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese); Native American

or Alaskan Native (specific tribal affiliation); Hawaiian Native or other Pacific Islander; some other race, ethnicity, or origin).

Other factors included education level (*1 = 1st year undergraduate; 2 = 2nd year undergraduate; 3 = 3rd year undergraduate; 4 = 4th year or more, which includes 4th year undergraduate; 5th + year*), military affiliation (*1 = yes; 2 = no*), military affiliation for friends or family (*1 = yes; 2 = no*), married status (*1 = yes; 2 = no*), and parental status (*1 = yes; 2 = no*).

Political views were also assessed (*1 = Liberal (Very Liberal; Liberal); 2 = Moderate; 3 = Conservative (Very conservative; Conservative)*), time allocated to TV and internet news (*1 = Frequent (Daily; Few times a week); 2 = Somewhat frequent (1x/week); 3 = Less Frequent (Less than once a week; Never)*), and where participants receive their news sources from (*1 = Liberal (Huffington Post; New York Times; CNN; USA Today); 2 = Moderate (Wall Street Journal; NPR); 3 = Conservative (Fox News; The Blaze / Glenn Beck Program); 4 = Other/ "I Prefer not to say"*).

Furthermore, this study evaluated future CJ career prospects (*1 = Legislation; 2 = Law Enforcement; 3 = Courts; 4 = Corrections; 5 = other/ "I do not know"*), whether students received any sex offender education in the past (*1 = yes; 2 = no*), and whether participants have personally met or currently know a registered sex offender (*1 = yes; 2 = no*). Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for each variable within the study and the categories for each variable.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables measuring and explaining attitudes towards sexual offenders from undergraduates majoring in CJ (N = 98)

Variables	Categories	Frequency <i>n</i> (%)
<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
Overall CATSO attitude scale		Mean: 60.40 SD: 7.66 Range: 44.00
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
News source	Liberal	42 (42.9%)
	Moderate	3 (3.1%)
	Conservative	15 (15.3%)
	Other/ I prefer not to say	38 (38.8%)
Internet news frequency	Frequently	64 (65.3%)
	Somewhat 1x/week	22 (22.4%)
	Less Frequent	12 (12.2%)
Watching TV news	Frequently	27 (27.6%)
	Somewhat 1x/week	23 (23.5%)
	Less Frequent	48 (49.0%)
Political view	Liberal	41 (41.8%)
	Moderate	42 (42.9%)
	Conservative	15 (15.3%)
Education level	1 st year	31 (31.6%)
	2 nd year	23 (23.5%)
	3 rd year	28 (28.6%)
	4 th & 5 th year	16 (16.3%)
Race	White	34 (34.7%)
	Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish	51 (52.0%)
	Origin	9 (9.2%)
	Black or African American	4 (4.1%)
	Other	
Gender	Cisgender Woman	64 (65.3%)
	Cisgender Man	29 (29.6%)
	Other	5 (5.1%)

Military affiliation	Yes	4 (4.1%)
	No	94 (95.9%)
Friends/ Family military affiliation	Yes	47 (48.0%)
	No	51 (52.0%)
Married status	Yes	2 (2.0%)
	No	96 (98.0%)
Parental status	Yes	3 (3.1%)
	No	95 (96.9%)
Future career path	Legislation	5 (5.1%)
	Law enforcement	37 (37.8%)
	Courts	29 (29.6%)
	Corrections	2 (2.0%)
	Other/ I do not know	25 (25.5%)
Participation in sexual offender educational course	Yes	10 (10.2%)
	No	88 (89.8%)
Met a registered sex offender	Yes	25 (25.5%)
	No	76 (74.5%)
Personally know a registered sex offender	Yes	22 (22.4%)
	No	76 (77.6%)

Analytic Strategy

The first step in the analysis was to re-code some of the individual CATSO items so that the participant responses to these items were being measured in the same direction as all other items (i.e., that higher scores all meant more negative attitudes towards sexual offenders).¹ Once re-coded, a composite variable was created that added all the 18 items together to create an overall scale that measured CJ students' attitudes towards sexual offenders (possible scores on the scale ranged from 18 to 90). Lower scores represented less punitive attitudes toward sexual offenders whereas higher scores reflected more

¹ Items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 16 were re-coded to transform the values within the CATSO scale where 5 = 1; 3 = 3; 4 = 2.

punitive attitudes. This scale was used as the dependent variable in all subsequent analyses.

To evaluate the first hypothesis of this study, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the mean of the dependent variable to determine what is the 'average' attitude of the sample in comparison to the midpoint value (54.00, which represents 'neutral' attitudes). Then, both One-Way ANOVA and Independent Samples T-Tests were used to test hypotheses 2 through 9. One-Way ANOVA was used to test hypotheses 2 through 7 specifically because it determines whether there are any statistically significant differences among the means of three or more independent groups of students. Independent Samples T-Tests were used to test hypotheses 8 and 9 to compare the means of only two independent groups of students and determine whether there were any statistically significant differences. The results of these analyses are presented below.

VI. RESULTS

To answer hypothesis one as outlined above, the general participant attitudes were overall more punitive towards sexual offenders (Mean = 60.40; SD = 7.66). Because the midpoint of the scale is 54.00 (which represents neutral attitudes towards sexual offenders), these results reject H_1 and, instead, demonstrate that the participants hold more punitive attitudes towards sex offenders because the mean value is higher than the midpoint.

Table 2 presents the results of the one-way ANOVA findings. H_2 through H_4 evaluated whether attitudes towards sex offenders varied by CJ students' future career paths. Results indicated that those interested in pursuing legislation (M = 61.60, SD = 5.94) and law enforcement (M = 61.32, SD = 6.97) were the most punitive. Those wishing to pursue a career in courts (M = 60.17, SD = 7.32) and corrections (M = 60.50, SD = 16.26) had slightly less punitive attitudes. Those who chose the categories Other/ "I do not know" (M = 59.04, SD = 9.03) were the least punitive towards this offender population in comparison to the other groups of students. Although the mean values for each of these groups were slightly different, the mean differences were not statistically significantly different [$F(4, 93) = .36, p = .84$]. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypotheses that CJ undergraduate students intending to pursue law enforcement display the most punitive attitudes, CJ undergraduate students intending to pursue careers within corrections will display less punitive attitudes than students intending to pursue law enforcement, and CJ undergraduate students intending to pursue careers within the court system will display the least punitive attitudes. This means that CJ students intending to

pursue different career paths have similar overall attitudes towards sexual offenders.

H₅ evaluated whether attitudes toward sex offenders varied by educational level. Results showed that those within the 2nd year of their undergraduate studies (M = 61.30, SD = 5.46) were the most punitive. The 1st year (M = 60.68, SD = 7.91) and 3rd year (M = 60.18, SD = 9.97) CJ undergraduate students were in the middle. 4th year students were the least punitive (M = 58.94, SD = 5.32). The results of the One-Way ANOVA analysis indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of sex offenders among the educational levels [$F(3, 94) = .32, p = .81$]. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that higher education levels display the least punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders. This means that the overall attitudes towards sexual offenders among CJ students do not differ with respect to their year of study (how much college education they have).

H₆ evaluated whether attitudes towards sex offenders varied by gender. Results indicated that cisgender men (M = 61.17, SD = 6.85) were the most punitive. Cisgender women (M = 60.44, SD = 7.73) were in the middle. Those who comprised the 'Other' group (M = 55.40, SD = 10.95) were the least punitive. There was not a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of sex offenders among the genders [$F(2, 95) = 1.22, p = .30$]. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that males displayed more punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders. It can be concluded that overall, CJ student attitudes towards sexual offenders do not vary by gender.

H₇ evaluated whether attitudes towards sex offenders varied by political views. Results demonstrated that those identifying as conservative (M = 64.40, SD = 8.26)

were the most punitive. Those who take a moderate stance ($M = 60.12$, $SD = 6.98$) were in the middle. Those who identified as liberal ($M = 59.22$, $SD = 7.82$) were the least punitive. Because there was a statistically significant difference among the three groups [$F(2, 95) = 2.64$, $p < .10$], we reject the null hypothesis that there is no meaningful difference in attitudes among those with different political views. Overall, CJ student attitudes towards sexual offenders do vary by political orientation.

Table 2.
One-Way ANOVA Results for Group Differences in Sexual Offender Attitudes

Variable	ANOVA F
Intended career path	.36
Education level	.32
Gender	1.22
Political affiliation	2.64 ⁺

Note: + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Results of the independent samples t-test are found in Table 3. H_8 evaluated whether those who had taken sexual offender and/or sexual offenses educational courses had less punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders than those who did not participate in such courses. Results demonstrated that individuals who participated in sexual offender courses ($M = 59.50$, $SD = 4.55$) did not have significantly lower punitive attitudes towards sex offenders [$t(96) = -.39$, $p = .70$, $d = -.13$] than those who did not receive sexual offender and/or sexual offenses educational courses ($M = 60.50$, $SD = 7.95$). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that individuals who participated in sexual offender and/or sexual offenses educational courses displayed less punitive attitudes than individuals who did not engage in a sexual offender course CJ student attitudes did not

vary between those who took a formal sexual offender and/or sexual offense educational course and those who did not.

H₉ evaluated whether those affiliated with sex offenders displayed less punitive attitudes. Results indicated that those who had met a registered sexual offender had lower punitive attitudes (M = 56.92, SD = 6.54) than those who had not previously met a registered sexual offender (M = 61.59, SD = 7.70), and this difference was statistically significant [t(96) = -2.71, *p* < .01, *d* = -.63]. Additionally, those who personally know a registered sexual offender (M = 56.73, SD = 6.27) had lower punitive attitudes towards this offender population than those who did not personally know a registered sexual offender (M = 61.46, SD = 7.74), and this difference was statistically significant [t(96) = -2.63, *p* < .01, *d* = -.64]. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no meaningful difference in attitudes between those who are affiliated with sex offenders and those who are not. Instead, the findings confirm that interactions with registered sexual offenders result in less punitive attitudes in comparison to those who do not have an affiliation with this offender population.

Table 3.
Independent Samples T-Test Results for Group Differences in Sexual Offender Attitudes

Variable	t
Taken sexual offender class	-.39
Met a registered sexual offender	-.2.71**
Knows a registered sexual offender	-.2.63**

Note: + *p*<.10; * *p*<.05; ***p*<.01; ****p*<.001.

VII. DISCUSSION

This study explored CJ student attitudes towards sexual offenders to identify their overall punitiveness, and it investigated factors that may account for some of the differences observed in the sample. These factors included the intended career paths of students, their educational levels, gender, political affiliations, past/current enrollment in a sex offender class, as well as any previous interactions with a registered sex offender. To identify the ‘overall’ attitudes, I utilized the 18-item CATSO instrument and added the items together to create an overall attitudes scale that ranged from 18 to 90 (Church II, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008). Higher scores indicated more punitive attitudes towards sex offenders, whereas lower scores suggested less punitive – or more favorable – attitudes towards this offender population. My first hypothesis predicted that CJ students would have less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders. I hypothesized this because I assumed that students enrolled in CJ classes were more exposed to the judicial system realities than the average population. Therefore, CJ undergraduates might be more attuned to harmful myths associated with sex offenders and offenses that help create more punitive policies for this crime category compared to other offending groups. However, the results indicated that students display more punitive– or less favorable – attitudes towards this offender population than was initially thought.

Because I adjusted the Likert scale in the CATSO instrument from six categories to five, I cannot conduct a *direct* comparison between these results and other findings from related studies. However, these results are not unusual compared to other studies regarding attitudes toward sex offenders. In the study by Rogers and Ferguson (2011),

for example, the authors investigated public attitudes towards sex offender punishment and rehabilitation compared to conceptually matched, nonsexual offenders. A key finding included more punitive attitudes towards sex offenders as opposed to nonsexual offenders. Additionally, Wiersma's (2016) study assessed CJ student attitudes towards various sex offender policies, and key findings also indicated more punitive attitudes towards sex offenders. CJ students may have similar attitudes as other populations due to a lack of real-world experience in the judicial system. Additionally, these students may rely more on media outlets that provide misleading information rather than scientific findings and/or official governmental crime reports.

To evaluate my other hypotheses, I utilized One-Way ANOVA and Independent Samples T-Tests to compare the overall attitudes of the different groups of students in my sample. H₂ through H₄ assessed whether different career prospects would influence the students' general punitiveness towards sex offenders. I predicted that students intending to pursue law enforcement would display the most punitive attitudes (H₂), students intending to pursue corrections would have less punitive attitudes than law enforcement (H₃), and students intending to pursue court systems would demonstrate the least punitive in all career categories (H₄). I hypothesized this because Saunders' (1988) study demonstrated that each CJ sector exhibited different attitudes towards sex offenders. Therefore, I assumed that students would enroll in courses more focused on a specific CJ path due to their interest, and these classes would influence undergraduate attitudes toward sex offenders. However, the differences in attitudes between students intending to pursue these different career paths were not statistically significant. From this, it can be.

concluded that students who will go into all three branches of the CJ system will have the same baseline attitudes towards sex offenders.

Saunders' (1988) study influenced me to assess CJ students' future career prospects as a variable because he evaluated five professional groups within the CJ system. Furthermore, key findings identified significant differences among child welfare social workers, police officers, district attorneys, public defenders, and judges. Public defenders were the least punitive, followed by social workers, whereas police officers were the most punitive among the groups, followed by judges. Therefore, my findings were unexpected, but these results may reflect the students' inexperience with the legal system to properly form a definite opinion compared to the professionals surveyed in Saunders' study.

This study also assessed whether there would be differences in attitude scores among students of different education levels. I predicted that students enrolled at university longer would express more favorable attitudes than students with less university experience. I hypothesized this relationship because more educated individuals may have had more opportunities to take CJ courses where the topic of sex offenders was discussed. Therefore, students would have been more educated in the group in comparison to a freshman student who has only taken a handful of courses in their degree thus far. However, the mean differences in attitudes were not statistically significant, either, meaning more educated students at the college level have similar punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders as those who have just begun post-secondary education. Although I predicted that different education levels would influence student attitudes towards sex offenders, my null results were not unusual and previous studies found

similar results. For example, Valliant, Furac, and Antonowicz (1994) examined whether university enrollment length in psychology courses impacted attitudes towards sex offenders. The main findings included no difference in attitudes between the groups, and the participants were not lenient towards sex offenders, either. Although the authors assessed psychology undergraduates and I evaluated CJ undergraduate students, both studies concluded similar findings. The psychology and CJ students may reflect similar findings because both studies analyzed fewer than one hundred participants. Therefore, finding a significant difference in these smaller samples is more difficult to identify whereas a bigger sample size may prove this variable as an influential factor.

It was also evaluated whether different genders influenced attitudes towards sexual offenders. It was initially predicted that male students would display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders than female participants because male victimization rates are statistically lower than female victimization rates (Olver & Barlow, 2010). Therefore, females would display more punitive attitudes toward sex offenders compared to males due to both their increased risk of victimization and increased fear of victimization (Rennison, 2002; May, Rader, & Goodrum, 2010). However, there was not a significant difference in the attitudes towards sex offenders among the genders, meaning that all of the genders had similar attitudes towards sexual offenders among CJ students. While these results do not suggest that gender is a discriminatory variable in this study, other researchers displayed alternative findings. For example, Olver and Barlow assessed whether personality traits affect societal attitudes towards sex offenders and assessed numerous variables, including gender. Results indicated that females, in comparison to males, estimated that sexual offenders have significantly higher sexual recidivism rates,

meaning that they were more punitive. Olver and Barlow suggested these results may reflect that young adult females are more apprehensive of sex offenders as this demographic group displays higher victimization rates in adult rape or other sexual crimes. Therefore, I was surprised that my results did not indicate similar findings. However, my findings may not have detected a significant difference between the genders because I had a smaller sample size ($n = 98$) and therefore there may not have been enough statistical power present to be able to do so.

I also assessed whether political affiliation affected the participant's attitudes toward sex offenders and predicted that this variable would not influence the students. I hypothesized this because I assumed that students lacked the experience to create a definite political opinion at their age compared to older populations. However, there was found to be a significant difference among political viewpoints where conservative students were the most punitive, moderate-affiliated individuals were more neutral, and liberal participants were the least punitive. This result indicates that political affiliations do affect CJ student attitudes toward sex offenders.

In support of this finding, Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) examined whether knowledge of sex offenders and conservative beliefs influence public attitudes. They found that knowledge and conservative beliefs significantly predicted more punitive attitudes toward sexual offenders. In other words, their significant findings indicated that lacking general sex offender knowledge predicted negative attitudes, and participants with conservative beliefs were more likely to contain negative attitudes towards sex offenders. Attitudes were especially negative when the two factors overlapped.

Hypothesis eight assessed whether participation in sex offender courses influenced student attitudes towards sex offenders and I predicted that undergraduate students with previous and/or current enrollment in a sex offender course will display less punitive attitudes towards sex offenders as compared to other participants not currently/ previously enrolled. I predicted this because other related studies (see, for example, Wurtele, 2018a; Wurtele, 2021b; Kleban, & Jeglic, 2012) have indicated a significant difference between students who enroll/ enrolled in educational sex offender courses compared to others who did not participate in these classes. Although individuals who had past/current enrollment in sexual offender courses displayed less punitive attitudes ($M = 59.50$, $SD = 4.55$) compared to the other undergraduates ($M = 60.50$, $SD = 7.95$), the results were not statistically significantly different. In other words, students who took a sex offender course have less punitive attitudes, meaning that the hypothesized relationship does exist, but because the mean difference between the two groups is not statistically significant, this result cannot be generalized back to the wider population.

Previous researchers have identified conflicting results on this topic. For example, Wurtele (2018a) tested whether a course in sex crimes against children could influence college students' attitudes towards child sex offenders. Results revealed that a semester-long course significantly affected the participants and students displayed less punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders after they participated in this course. Wurtele also informed that in a pretest-posttest design, students subscribed to fewer stereotypes and reduced support for punitive sanctions compared to students enrolled in general classes. Therefore, my findings were unexpected, and these alternative results may reflect different findings due to the participants' classes.

In other words, my study did not explicitly question the sex offender classes the students participated in nor evaluated their class duration. This is something that should be examined in future research.

The final hypothesis evaluated whether affiliation with a registered sex offender influenced student attitudes towards sex offenders. I anticipated that CJ undergraduate students who are affiliated with sex offenders will display less punitive attitudes than others not associated with sex offenders due to their lack of exposure. This assumption was supported and students who had met or who had personally known a registered sex offender significantly showed less punitive attitudes as compared to participants who have not met nor had personally known a registered sex offender.

These findings correspond to comparable results in other studies, including those found by Wurtele (2021b). In Wurtele's study, his research assessed the public perception of sex offenders before and after individual engagement with Sex Crimes Against Children courses and interpersonal contact with sex offenders. Findings showed that interpersonal contact with registered sex offenders significantly influenced the participants' attitudes towards sex offenders and demonstrated that direct contact with this stigmatized group reduced support for punitive sanctions. Therefore, my findings reinforce those of Wurtele and suggest that to dispel myths and/or negative attitudes towards this population, reintegration of offenders back into the community and/or exposing the public to this population may be helpful in this endeavor.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study revealed that undergraduate students who majored in CJ reflected more punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders. Future studies should replicate these findings using student samples from different universities. If results are comparable, researchers should consider ways to reduce punitiveness so future justice professionals understand sex offender realities to maintain impartiality. This study also found significant differences in attitudes between students who identify with different political affiliations and individuals who interacted with registered sex offenders. Given these findings, the next logical question to ask is: why do we see such differences between these groups? Future researchers should investigate these variables and using that information, educational institutions may want to target sex offender education courses to students of certain political affiliation(s) and/or those who are unaware of or who have never met a sexual offender.

Despite the significant findings, this study is not without its limitations. First, this study suffered from a relatively small sample size that may have made it more difficult to detect significant differences among groups of CJ students. That is, the probability that the hypothesis test detected a true effect is reduced due to the small sample size (i.e., type II error). Although the test is 90% confident that a type II error was not committed, there is still a 10% chance this error occurred, and comparing these results to previous studies is difficult. Therefore, researchers should replicate this study to improve the reliability of the findings.

Another limitation includes the participants themselves, as this is a specific university sample and caution always needs to be made when generalizing this

demographic to the broader population of CJ students. Therefore, future research that replicates this study should consider the participants' backgrounds to encapsulate a wide range of socioeconomic statuses, geographical differences, nationalities, and educational levels. Additionally, this sample included a selection bias towards legal professionals. Therefore, this sample may not represent the CJ student university population in the United States, and future studies should obtain a more representative sample to advance the literature in this area.

To further improve research on sex offenders and sexual offenses, future studies should also incorporate measures of social desirability or an impression management scale. Due to the sensitive nature of sexual offending, future studies may benefit from incorporating these measures to address response biases, particularly when assessing undergraduate populations on an emotionally charged topic. Additionally, future studies need to analyze the relationship between the CATSO score and other influential factors that might explain variation in public attitudes towards sexual offenders. It is important to assess the predictive validity of the CATSO instrument to further assess its reliability and validity. Therefore, future analyses must replicate this study with other populations to evaluate the measurement's accuracy and test the instrument's sensitivity to attitude changes when another variable is introduced (Church II, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008).

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A – CATSO INSTRUMENT

CATSO SCALE (Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders)

Item Number	Item
1	Sex offenders have difficulty making friends even if they try really hard.
2	Most sex offenders do not have close friends.
3	Most sex offenders keep to themselves.
4	Sex offenders prefer to stay home alone rather than be around lots of people.
5	Most sex offenders are unmarried men.
6	Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison.
7	Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.
8	People who commit sex offenses should lose their civil rights (e.g., voting and privacy).
9	Trying to rehabilitate a sex offender is a waste of time.
10	With support and therapy, someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior.
11	A sex offense committed against someone the perpetrator knows is less serious than a sex offense committed against a stranger.
12	Only a few sex offenders are dangerous.
13	Someone who uses emotional control when committing a sex offense is not as bad as someone who uses physical control when committing a sex offense.

- 14 The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes.
- 15 Male sex offenders should be punished more severely than female sex offenders.
- 16 Sexual fondling (inappropriate unwarranted touch) is not as bad as rape.
- 17 Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity.
- 18 People who commit sex offenses want to have sex more often than the average person.

Source: Church et al. (2008)

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