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## The Exploration of Human Service Workers Personal Bias in Regards Sex Offenders

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The Exploration of Human Service Workers Personal Bias in Regards Sex Offenders

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**Abstract**

This study examines the relationship of dehumanization, public emotion, and social distance theory in regards to human service workers personal bias on the subject of sex offenders. This study aimed to determine the following: (a). To encourage human service workers to self assess for personal bias and counter transference regarding working with sex offenders. (b). Respond and support treatment programs and government policy that are factual based. (c). Increase the fair, objective treatment of those who have sexually offended. The researcher explored current government policies and its impact on those who sexually offended and society as a whole while questioning its impact on human service workers. A thirteen question survey was employed that encouraged human service workers to examine their personal bias. Using two well known social media websites, 94 participants responded to the online survey. The survey concluded that the human service workers studied were neutral and somewhat in favor of sex offender law creation while less than half (43%) checked their registries within the past year. Bogardus Social Distance Scale was utilized and it was concluded that there was a 49% preferred social distance element between sex offenders and the human services workers studied. More research is called for to determine whether personal bias of sex offenders impacts practice.

*Keywords:* Sex Offenders, Social Distance, Dehumanization, Sex Offender Registries

The Minnesota Sex Offender Program (MSOP) has frequented the local and national media in recent years. It houses 697 patients within two locations and acts as a treatment avenue for those who have been deemed as sexually dangerous with a high risk of reoffending (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2014). Most offenders will complete their sentence and then are transferred to one of the treatment centers on an indefinite civil commitment. Each patient receives sex offender treatment in hopes of rehabilitation to one day be released on a provisional discharge. For many patients, discharge is unlikely as only one patient has been released in the program's 20 year history (I'Jaaven, McGrath, & Murphy, 2012). The program does not act as a prison or jail as it is a civil commitment program.

Many patients have filed lawsuits against the program stating it is unconstitutional. They were met with a backlash of public fear from media representation arguing for patients to remain confined. This highlights the quandary that sanctions for sex offenders are motivated by public emotion rather than factual evidence that sex offender treatment can be successful in reducing recidivism (Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009). General public fear against the sex offender population have been damaging to those seeking recovery in the community. It has been found that registered sex offenders commonly experience social isolation, housing issues, and lack of employment opportunities while living in the community (Burchfield and Mingus, 2014; Levenson and Cotter, 2005). This conundrum leaves sex offenders who are in treatment with negative psychological issues. A small study of 132 community sex offenders revealed the population shared similar psychological issues that include embarrassment, shame, and hopelessness (Mercado et al, 2008). Such negative emotions may further hinder the healing process.

Despite public shaming and strict sanctions (which will be discussed in the literature portion of the paper), sex offenders often turn to human service workers while residing in inpatient treatment and in the community for intervention. Jane Addams, a pioneer of the American social welfare movement, created a foundation of community members helping fellow community members in need at Hull House, Chicago at the turn of the 20th century (Quam, 2013). Human service workers carry on Addams' values today often working alongside at-risk populations for the greater good of social welfare. If human service workers represent the community one would assume that they hold similar values to the community at large. The public emotion regarding sex offender sanctions may or may not be shared by human service workers. This may have potential to be problematic if human service workers support harsh sanctions based on public emotion of fear. This is despite scientific evidence that suggests community support reduces recidivism rates (Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009).

Workers in the helping profession often receive a college education and follow a professional code of ethics that serve to protect the public from incompetence (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). They are also encouraged to practice mindfulness of personal differences to offset possible harmful decisions based on counter transference. For instance, The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008) state, "Social workers... [are] mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination". The purpose of this research is to examine the attitudes and bias held by human service workers in regards to sex offenders and compare it to that of the general public. This researcher theorizes human service workers hold similar attitudes and bias regarding sex offenders when compared to the general population. One must ask themselves; do social workers support distancing sex offenders from their

communities? This study aims to determine the following: (a). To encourage human service workers to self assess for personal bias and counter transference regarding working with sex offenders. (b). Respond and support treatment programs and government policy that are factual based. (c). Increase the fair, objective treatment of those who have sexually offended. For the purposes of this report, the term "sex offender" will be used to describe those who have committed sex offenses. Sex offender is an ambiguous term that describes a juvenile or an adult that has victimized another through means of sexual gratification and/or violence.

## **Literature Review**

### **Federal Sex Offender Registries**

In 1996 the Minnesota Sex Offender Community Notification Act was implemented so local law enforcement could provide the community facts that a level three sex offender would be living their neighborhood (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2013). It was designed that such awareness could help the community protect itself from its members that are deemed predatory. The act was developed directly due to the mass public fear of sex offender recidivism (Camartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009). Recent literature often reference two significant federal legislation laws that changed the way communities respond to those who committed sex offenses.

Burchfield and Mingus (2014) theorize that public fear regarding the recidivism of sex offenders is the result of the highly publicized kidnappings like that of eleven year old Jacob Wetterling in Minnesota and the rape and murder of seven year old Megan Kanka in New Jersey in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Jacob's mother, Patty Wetterling rallied bipartisan support for local sex offenders to register based on a Megan's Law which was created and implemented in

New Jersey. Sex Offender registries are a database that comprises the names and addresses of those who have been convicted of sexually offending. Some of this information is available to the public via internet. This sparked federal awareness of the problem and the Jacob Wetterling Act was soon implemented in 1996 and again in 1998 when the Jacob Wetterling Improvements Act updated flaws (Thomas, 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). These and other media reports have been tools to spread awareness of upholding one's personal safety against strangers and known sex offenders and dangerous people. Both tragedies resulted in federal laws that promote consistency and awareness throughout the 50 states.

### **Public Emotion and Attitudes**

Despite these safe guards, moral panic remains on the rise. Kathryn Fox (2013), an Associate Program Director for the University of Vermont, describes this phenomena as "moral panic" and applied it to the sex offender population. Fox explains five components that make up moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. The concern regarding sex offenders are present as stories, awareness, and blog entries color the internet and other media outlets. Never before has the public have facts, names, and opinions on the tips of their fingers. Fox states that moral panic has strengthened since the introduction of sex offender treatment as a condition of release. Interpretations of judge's choice to trust sex offender treatment than prison time remains unpopular and conflicted (Fox, 2013).

Society has evolved to universally "hate" and condemn sex offenders (Thakker, 2012, p 151). Viki, Fullerton, & Raggett, et el (2012) wrote that animalistic dehumanizing language is often used when addressing members of the sex offender population. Sex offenders are shunned from society, often being deprived of basic human relational necessities and underserving of civic treatment. Sex offenders are perceived as less than human in some instances when

belonging to the outside of main-stream society. It is easier to justify the maltreatment of "outsiders " (of main stream society) due to the lack humanistic emotion related to those compared to insiders (Opatow, 1990; Viki, Fullerton, & Raggett, et el, 2012). When studying social perception, Levenson et al. (2007) found that three-fourths of the population studied supported unspecified castration as a treatment method.

Language within media venues also have been proven to influence personal and political opinion. In a study conducted by Viki and his team in 2012 of 100 random Florida community participants found that the more dehumanizing language is used to describe sex offenders, the less likely the participants were to support sex offender treatment and the more likely to support longer prison sentences. They also found that communities were more likely to socially exclude sex offenders from their community, especially those who had the label "child molester." In the same study, Viki and his colleagues (2012) found that people were willing to go to extremes to mitigate the perceived threat of sex offenders living in their community. Of the 100 people surveyed, the respondents were more likely to use eugenic strategies, like castration and murder, to treat sex offenders than any other treatment avenue (Viki et al, 2012).

Evidence also suggest that there is massive public mistrust in the effectiveness of sex offender treatment. From a study conducted in 1999 of the general population, forensic psychologist and researcher, Sarah Brown states that a quarter of the population studied believed that sex offender treatment was ineffective. The same study also asked participants if they would feel comfortable of community based sex offender treatment within their neighborhood. Almost two-thirds of the community opposed the idea of community sex offender treatment while the remaining one-third approved of it. From the two-thirds that opposed community treatment, 26 percent stated that they felt so strongly to keep treatment in prisons that they would be willing to

sign a petition. However, those who did support community treatment stated that they were unwillingly to actively support such treatment centers in their own neighborhood (Brown, 1999).

### **The Media's Response to Sex Offenders**

The media has played a role in the development in law creation. A study that was conducted in the 1930s and 1940s by sociologist, Sutherland directly linked public panic to readily available media reports of adults sexually assaulting minors. This fear led community leaders to form committees and ultimately to develop legislature for laws to manage "sexual psychopaths" (Sutherland, 1950; Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis, 2013). The media still holds power influencing public emotion today. Several studies have been conducted since Sutherland's landmark research suggested serious sex offenses are vastly over-represented in the media when compared to serious non-sexual crimes (Thakker, 2012). Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis (2013) theorize that public fear surrounding sex offenders have increased so much that more laws are in place to manage and punish this population than any other criminal type in the nation.

The media holds significant power over sex offender legislature. More research is being produced that underline the important role that media plays in law creation (Thakker, 2012). Public emotion and media reports are often used in law creation. Such media reports have the ability to be exaggerated, contain highly bias content, and show interviews with victims and their families. The same studies indicate that the media is not always accurate when providing information to its viewers. It is unclear how constituents take in this information, but the polls definitely reflect the notion the media can influence voters (Thakker, 2012). Ultimately, legislature and laws are based upon myths, misinformation, and public emotion in which may not reflect the communities true public safety needs (Conley et al, 2011).

### **Sex Offender and Treatment Myths**

Galeste et al and his team examined the role of sex offender stereotypes within newspapers and found common myths among headlines that tend to shape public perception. Galeste et al (2012) found that newspapers state that sex offenders have higher levels of recidivism. The public believes sexual compulsion is a trait all sex offenders hold when really only 10-15 percent of sex offenders recidivate (general re-arrests) within a five year period. This is compared to all other at risk crimes (like burglary, larceny, and auto-theft) where the recidivism rate remains near 70 percent (Langan, Schmitt & Derose, 2003). In another similar study, Hanson and Harris (2004) found that 20 percent of sex offenders will reoffend within the first 10 years of supervised release. This is compared to the 87 percent recidivism rate to “general criminal population”. Another myth that Galeste and his team mention is that sex offenders specialize in sexual offending once a juvenile crime has been committed. This has been deemed untrue as Zimring and his team (2007; Zirning et al, 2009) reports that sexual offending as a juvenile is not a predictor of adult sexual offending. A third myth that newspapers assume is that sex offenders share common denominators, like only offend on strangers and children. A lot of time and energy is spent at monitoring sex offenders whose victims are children. Most sex offenders victims are adults (Galeste, 2012). An example of this stereotype is that most children are murdered by pedophiles when in reality only 18% of child murders "involve sexual motives" (Thakker, 2012).

### **Sex Offender Sanctions and Results**

Sanctions have been in place for many years. Sex offenders are heavily monitored and must meet registration standards in the community or else they return to confinement. Laws have been created that dictate where a sex offender can live, work, travel, or whether or not to

have access to social networking sites like Facebook or Myspace upon release from prison (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). Most sex offenders live in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods or rural areas that lack social capital as a result of registration (Burchfield & Mingus, 2014). Housing poses as a real challenge as communities respond to registries. Landlords and employers alike are suspicious of hiring sex offenders as they also serve to protect children and vulnerable adults. Due to the rigid nature of laws and expectations living outside of prison, some sex offenders feel as though they cannot meet society's standards and "give up" when avoiding new offences (Camartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009).

Those who support sex offenders can be ostracized as well and may face criticism. The public has been known to transfer such stigmas from the sex offender to their helping friend, landlord, or employer. This increases the social isolation that surrounds the sex offender population as those who are helping are seen as violating the moral integrity of one's community (Burchfield & Mingus, 2014).

Sex offender registries were designed to make sex offenders more visible in the community as they reintegrate. In a study of random residents of Washington State, eighty percent of participants thought the sex offender registry was an important tool in keeping neighborhoods safe (Camartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009). Burchifield & Mingus state the opposite happens. Registries encourage the sex offender to become invisible due to its demonizing label and the stigma (2014). Sex offenders are at risk of social, emotional, and physical harassment. To avoid this, sex offender's personal safety may be compromised and must hide in the shadows to avoid emotional and social consequences. Unfortunately, as social isolation and personal stress increase so do the recidivism rates (Burchifield & Mingus, 2014; Farley, 2008).

Punishment versus sex offender treatment remains controversial when utilized in court. Wolfe & Higgins (2008) found that politically conservative college students were less likely to promote sex offender treatment than punitive measures like punishment. Furthermore, males were thought to be perceived as more dangerous when compared to their female counterparts. Males were more likely to receive harsher punishments than women. In the same study, respondents sought the same severe sanctions to each perpetrator no matter what the victims' age was. It made no difference if the victim was eight years old or fourteen at the time of the crime (Wolfe & Higgins 2008).

Some communities spend a multitude of time and resources on monitoring registered sex offenders, even if the targeted population is labeled "low risk." For an example, many resources are spent monitoring sex offenders that were strangers to their victims than those who were familiar (Burchfield & Mingus, 2014). Research shows that those who knew their victims occur more commonly; however, more time and energy is spent monitoring stranger-orientated offenders. In a 2008 (Sandler et al) study that was conducted in New York, this style of registry monitoring was satisfactory to community members as it took attention away from the most common sex offences, like that of a trusted family member.

Burchfield and Mingus (2014) remind their readers that sex offender registries are ineffective of preventing further sex crimes. Tewksbury & Jennings (2010) report that registries have "virtually no impact" on preventing recidivism rates. Furthermore, a large percentage of the public does not utilize the public registry or know where local sex offenders live within their communities. It is suggested that although registries are popular and widely discussed in media and legislature, notification laws are not fulfilling goals of empowering the community with knowledge so they are able to protect themselves accordingly (Burchfield & Mingus, 2014). One

author proposed that conditions of the sex offender registry does "more harm than good" (Barnes, 2011. p. 406). Multiple authors purposed that repairing community relations is what influences recidivism rates (Viki et al, 2012; Howells & Day, 1999; Brown & Elrod, 1995; Hanson & Harris, 2001). Lack of support for sex offenders that were released back in community may actually increase the risk of reoffending due to social isolation and marginalization (Viki, et al, 2012; Rikis, 2005).

Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis (2012) conducted a study that challenged the lack of empirical evidence that supports the effectiveness of sex offender registry. The study measured members of legislature and criminal justice practitioners from differing areas across the United States. Twenty-five percent of studied policymakers and 20 percent of criminal justice practitioners said that their state's sex offender registry was ineffective. Furthermore, 20 percent of the policy makers and another 20 percent of practitioners reported that they did not know if their registry was effective (Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis, 2012). Both policy makers and practitioners were asked if they believed sex offender treatment was effective in reducing recidivism. Fifty percent of the population studied stated that sex offender treatment can be useful in reducing recidivism while 23 percent of the respondents had no opinion either way. Lastly, approximately one in four policy makers and practitioners were skeptical of the effectiveness of sex offender treatment (Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis, 2012). This shows that public emotion can influence policy maker's beliefs in producing laws that support treatment based interventions versus sanction based methods.

### **Occupation Specific Attitudes**

As sex offender treatment is gaining popularity it is essential for communities to become aware of the treatment. Willis et al (2010) wrote that such stigma and barriers to rejoining the population after release can become a serious obstacle to the success of reduced recidivism. They proposed that if communities are unwilling to accept the community members back it could ultimately create more possible danger in coalescing recidivism rates. Willis suggests keeping a constructive and objective view becomes crucial with those working with the sex offender population. Several studies have been implemented to study the effects of education and training of probation officers, prison officers, and psychologists with varying results (Willis et al, 2010). In a 1993 study conducted by Hogue probation and prison officers, views of sex offenders improved after a two day training of sex offenders that included theory and best practice models. Another study conducted in 2005 by Craig of police officers and community hostel workers concluded that their views did not change despite the provided two day training. Furthermore a similar study was conducted with police officers in 2007 (Johnson et al) which concluded the participants views changed more negatively after the two day training.

Members of occupations hold similar views as their comrades when discussing views of sex offenders. In a 1993 study, Hogue measured attitudes of police officers, prison officers, probation officers, psychologists, and sex offenders on their views of the sex offender population. Police officers held the most negative attitudes of the population while the sex offenders themselves held the most positive despite having the least amount of contact. Hogue (1993) suggested that one's occupation and/or role can influence one's attitudes towards the sex offender population.

*Therapist Specific Attitudes.* Psychotherapists generally hold more positive views of sex offenders than other professions. A study was conducted that measured college students and therapists perceptions using Bogardus' Social Distance Scale (1925, 1933, 1968) to determine how accepting they are in regards to living or working with sex offenders. The study, conducted by Shechory and Idisis in 2006, confirmed that students held more stereotypes against sex offenders and rated the most distance between themselves, sex offenders and victims of sexual assault. The study shown that 27 percent of students were willing to live in the same neighborhood as sex offenders whereas only 0.8 percent of students were willing to marry a sex offender. This is compared to the therapists measured who held lesser stereotypes towards sex offenders, but still put some social distance between themselves and them. Approximately 43 percent of therapists agreed to live in the same neighborhood whereas 2.31 percent of them were willing to marry a sex offender (Shechory & Idisis, 2006). Despite having lesser stereotypes than students, therapists were still measured having distance from sex offenders.

Although there was some literature regarding therapist bias when working with sex offenders, literature regarding general human service providers personal bias was largely absent. Human service providers are often at the front lines of meeting sex offender's social, emotional, and economic needs when needed in various settings. One question that arouse was do human service professionals share the same social exclusion bias as the general public. Do they support sex offender registry laws? These questions become important as human service providers continue to work with sex offenders. The answer to the question may raise additional societal questions as sex offenders require social support to lower recidivism.

## Conceptual Framework

### Theoretical Framework

There are several theories that exist that explain why sex offenders reoffend. One theory suggests that sex offenders often reoffend because they are at a loss of primary human goods which "reflect certain states of mind, outcomes, and experiences that are important for all humans to have in their lives" (Willis et al, 2013, p 3). This particular theory of treatment is called the Good Lives Model proposed by Tony Ward in 2002. The Good Lives Model is described as a strengths based model that helps offenders create future lives that does not include recidivism.

The Good Lives Model rests on the ethical concept of human dignity and maintaining human rights while also being held accountable for one's actions. This addresses the dehumanization phenomena that has excluded many sex offenders from the general population. This theory poses that loss of agency, belonging, and community are factors for recidivism rates. In past programs, therapists have focused on their client self-disclosing past sexual aggression to take future responsibility for their actions. This focus can exclude client strengths and life goals that pertinent to the client. Ward proposed that with risk management strategies, focusing on strengths and adequate life planning can help reduce future recidivism rates (Willis et al, 2013).

Ward and his colleagues studied common areas of primary goals among the general population. They reviewed the common psychological, social, biological, and anthropological factors that make human autonomy. They presented ten common factors that they called primary goods and associated the with a life goal. The goods are life (healthy living and functioning), knowledge, excellence in work or play, excellence in agency (autonomy and self-directedness), inner peace (freedom from emotional turmoil and stress), relatedness (intimate, romantic, and

family relationships), community, spirituality (finding meaning and purpose in life), happiness, and creativity (Yates and Prescott, 2011a, 2011b; Yates et al 2010).

Social Distance is a theory that was developed by Emory Bogardus in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It remains a landmark study that examines cultural, ethnic, and religious attitudes. The study's original purpose was to measure social attitudes in regards to immigrants working in the United States during the Progressive Era (Feldman & Soydan, 2013). The first study, *Measuring Social Distance* (Bogardus, 1925), came during a time where widespread prejudice was a barrier for immigrants to gain meaningful and safe work. Bogardus worked to capture the distance that established Americans held against the immigrant population. He surveyed participants using seven question yes/no scale. He measured the social acceptance of one's culture into another by asking if the participant would bar an outsider from country or would allow the outsider to visit. The questions progressively becomes more intimate with the last question asking if the participant would marry one from another culture (Bogardus, 1925, 1933) . The social distance theory continues to be used today to measure distance and acceptance of subcultures today (Parrillo & Donoghue, 2013).

### **Application of Framework to Research Topic**

The exclusion of sex offenders from society, along with public fear and dehumanizing language, may have unforeseen consequences to the general public as a whole. Social workers have historically worked with victims in the past. Social work seeks to protect human rights of victims and advocate for the needs of those who are vulnerable. Often times, communities feel ambivalent of incorporating sex offenders back into the community. Social workers find themselves not equipped to address the needs of the area's sex offenders (Ackerman & Furman, 2012). This factor will be further explored once data is received and processed.

## **Methods**

### **Study Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this study was to investigate human service professionals personal bias regarding sex offenders. Since personal bias is very complex to measure in a simple mass form, social distance theory was applied to measure the social acceptance of human service workers in regards to the sex offender population. This information assisted the researcher to determine if further topics were needed for additional exploration. This researcher used quantitative research methods to collect data from participating human service professionals. An online survey was used to collect the above data.

### **Sample**

The researcher deployed an online survey and posted an invitation to take it on the online social networking websites, Reddit.com and Facebook.com. Reddit is a free online community where its members can post, view, and create sub-communities called sub-reddits. The user-created sub-reddits are supported by a network of volunteers. People who visit the website are often called Redditors. The researcher used this website using the sub-community “social work” (reddit.com/r/socialwork). Social workers and human service workers across the United States and the world use the sub-reddit to discuss information regarding the social work profession. The research also posted an invitation to take the survey on Facebook.com within a private social work forum called Social Workers Allied for Problem Solving (SWAPS). The researcher captured the sample of self-identified social workers and/or human service workers that visited the social work sub-reddit and private Facebook page. The researcher’s goal was to obtain at least 30 responses to the online survey using Qualtrics sampling tool.

### **Data Collection Instrument Development and Categories of Questions**

A thirteen question survey developed by the researcher was used to gather data from self identified human service workers who visit a social networking website, Reddit.com/r/socialwork and Facebook. Qualtrics was the online survey instrument used. Survey questions were designed to examine the personal bias of human service workers regarding sex offenders. A complete list of survey questions can be found on Appendix B.

Table one lists questions one through three. The first question asks if the respondent is a self-identified human service worker. This assisted the researcher into omitting information from respondents who do not identify as a human service worker. The second question asked the respondent if they have worked with a sex offender. This question aimed to measure the number of human service professionals who have experience working with sex offenders versus those who do not work with sex offenders. The last question on Table 1 asks if the respondent has checked their local sex offender registry website within the last year. It was also hypothesized that most human service professions do not use their local sex offender registry website as intended.

Table two presents three statements that measure personal attitudes regarding sex offender registries, legislature, and civil commitments. A five point Likert scale (disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, agree) was introduced to agree or disagree to the following statements: 1) I support local registries; 2) There needs to be more laws in place to manage the sex offenders living in my area; and 3) I support indefinite civil commitments for eligible sex offenders upon release from prison. The third statement has a note informing the respondent what a civil commitment mandate is by stating “civil commitments mandate the person to attend treatment and/or live in a residential treatment center indefinitely.” The

researcher hypothesized that respondents would reply neutrally to the statements showing that the human service workers responded neither support or are against registries, additional legislation, and civil commitments.

Lastly, Table 3 (see appendix B) shows a modified social distance scale. The scale's questions were modified to reflect the sex offender population instead of the immigrant population from Bogardus' original study (1925, 1933). The scale lists seven statements that the respondent responded with a yes or no answer. The statements begin with the most distance between the respondent and the sex offender population and end with the least distance. The statements are listed as followed: 1) I am willing to live in the same state as sex offenders; 2) I am willing to live in the same city/town as sex offenders; 3) I am willing to live in the same neighborhood as sex offenders; 4) I am willing to live the same building as sex offenders; 5) I am willing to work in the same organization as a sex offender; 6) I am willing to be a close friend to a sex offender; and 7) I am willing to marry a sex offender. The researcher hypothesized that the majority of the respondents will be more accepting than not for the statements one through three. The researcher also hypothesized that the majority of respondents will be non-accepting of sex offenders than accepting for statements four through seven.

### **Measures for Protection of Human Subjects**

Measures were taken place to ensure confidentiality of the data, anonymity of the respondent, and informed consent during the collection of data. The research project and all its relevant data was presented to the University of Saint Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) that ensured the researcher obeyed the ethical standards for human research and that the participant's private information was protected. Participants were asked to read an online form that educated them on informed consent. Information regarding the purpose of the study and its

risks and benefits were available to the participant. Data was not collected until the IRB approved the research project in question.

All data collected remained in confidence by the researcher. The data collected was stored using a secure online user account with Qualtrics that is password protected. The researcher was the only one to access the account. All data will be destroyed June 15th, 2015 following the presentation of the research project.

There were no benefits for participants to partake in the study; however, there were risks associated. Due to the nature of measuring personal bias of the sex offender population, some questions and statements may have triggered negative emotions within participants. National resources for sexual violence were available on the consent form in the event of a possible emotive trigger. Participants could disengage taking the survey at any time and could choose to consult with the provided resources if needed. Participants with high responses to triggers involving sex offenders, sexual assault, and violence were discouraged from participating in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the number of participants who work in the human services field. Those who reported that they do not work or never worked in the human service field information was omitted from the research. Descriptive statistics continued to be utilized to interpret the number of human service workers worked with sex offenders versus those who have not for survey question two on Table one (see Appendix B). This was repeated for question three that determined how many human service workers use their sex offender registry within the past year.

Table two on Appendix B shows a Likert scale containing statements four, five and six. An ordinal logistic regression test was run to determine the mean distance in order to understand common attitudes among human service workers regarding personal bias of sex offender sanctions. This information was compared using a chi test to question two on Table 1 to compare to the attitudes of those who have worked with sex offenders versus those who have not.

Lastly, the social distance scale on Table three on Appendix B was interpreted using a frequency distribution matrix. Each statement is assigned a number. The most distance between the respondent and a sex offender (the statement that asks if the respondent is willing to live in the same state as sex offenders) was given a score of one while the least distance the respondent is willing to have with a sex offender (marriage) was given a seven. They earned a score of zero if they answer “no” to each question in a weighted response. The score will be added. The higher the score, Bogardus (1925, 1933) hypothesized the lowest level of social acceptance. The results of the following tests was interpreted and described in the findings section of this paper.

**Results**

Eighty-two participants completed the survey. Referring to Table one, it shows that 97 percent of the participants who answered question one identified as human service workers. Two participants did not identify as human service workers and were directed to the end of the survey.

Table 1  
Respondents who self-identified as a human service worker.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	85	97%
2	No	3	3%
	Total	88	100%

Bar Graph

Table two shows a bar graph of the results of the question asking if the human service worker worked with at least one person whom had sexually offended. Out of the 81 participants

who responded, 62 (77 percent) stated that they have worked with a sex offender at least once. This is compared to the 19 (23 percent) of participants who have not worked with a sex offender throughout their careers.

Table 2

2. Human service workers who worked with at least one person who have sexually offended.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		62	77%
2	No		19	23%
	Total		81	100%

Bar Graph

Table three shows a bar graph from the results of the human service workers who have checked the local sex offender registry website in the past year versus those who do. Forty-seven participants (57 percent) reported that they did not check their local registries in the past year as compared to 35 (43 percent) who responded that they did. This supported the statement that most human service professions do not use their local sex offender registry website as intended.

Table 3

3. Number of social workers who have checked their local sex offender registries within the last year

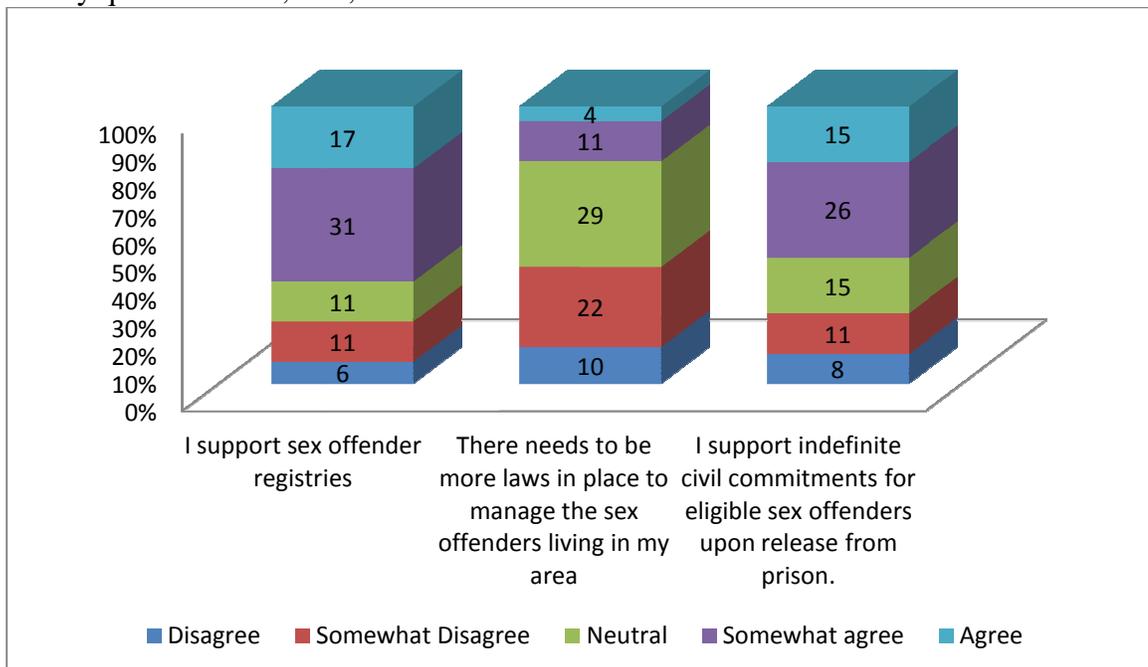
#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		35	43%
2	No		47	57%
	Total		82	100%

Bar Graph

Figure one shows a column graph that shows the results for survey statements four (I support sex offender registries), five (There needs to be more laws in place to manage the sex offenders living in my area), and six (I support civil commitments for eligible sex offenders upon release from prison. Note: Civil Commitments mandate the person to attend treatment and/or live in a residential treatment center indefinitely). Upon asking if they disagree, somewhat disagree, feel neutral, somewhat agree, and agree on whether they support sex offender registries, the

majority of the 76 responses stated they somewhat agree (31). This is compared to the least popular answer disagree (6). Table four shows the calculated mean of 3.55 with a standard deviation of 1.22. Next, question five on figure one reveals that 29 respondents of the 76 surveyed felt neutral regarding if there is a need to have more laws in place to manage sex offenders living in their area. The least popular answer of this question was strongly agree (4). The mean calculated to 2.70 with a standard deviation of 1.05 on table five. Lastly, 26 respondents of the 75 surveyed showed that they somewhat agree for civil commitments of eligible sex offenders upon release from prison. This is compared to the least popular answer of eight who disagreed with the statement. Questions four and six supported the null hypothesis: the majority of the human service workers who participated somewhat agreed in favor of sex offender registries and civil commitments following prison. Question five supported the hypothesis which showed that the majority of the human service worker respondents were neutral in supporting new laws to manage sex offenders in their areas.

Figure 1  
Survey questions four, five, and six results



Bar Graph

Table 4  
Survey results for questions four, five, and six

Statistic	I support sex offender registries	There needs to be more laws in place to manage the sex offenders living in my area	I support civil commitments for eligible sex offenders upon release from prison
Mean	3.55	2.70	3.39
Standard Deviation	1.22	1.05	1.26
Total Responses	76	76	75

Table 4

Table five and figure two shows the results of Bogardus’ Social Distance Theory that was modified for the purpose of this study. Seventy-six participants responded to questions one through three while 75 responded to four through seven. All of the respondents answered “yes” when asked if they were willing to live in the same state as sex offenders. The same result yielded for question two that asked if respondents were willing to live in the same city/town as sex offenders. Both question one and question two were given zero out of one and two as a weighted response. Sixty-three of the 76 respondents on question three reported that they were willing live in the same neighborhood as sex offenders as opposed to the 13 that were unwilling to live in the same neighborhood. The weighted response calculated to 0.513158 out of three. Questions one through three supported the hypothesis that the majority of respondents were willing to live in the same state, town, and neighborhood of sex offenders.

Table 5  
Social Distance Results

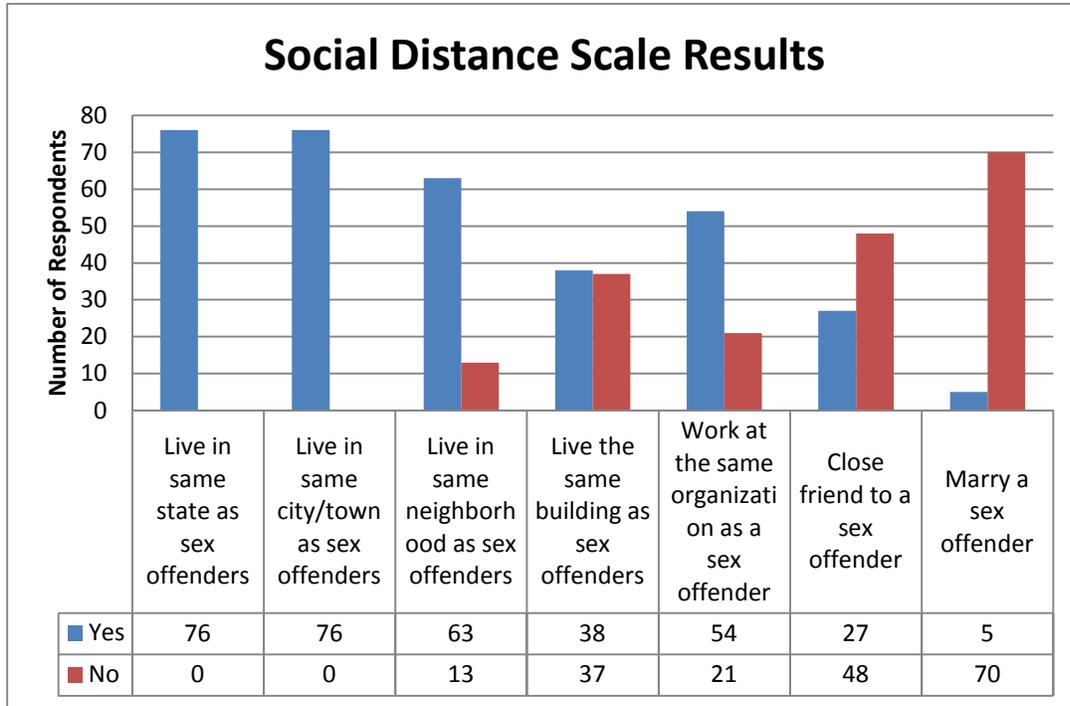
Question	Yes	No	Total	Mean	Weighted Total	Total Possible
1 I am willing to live in the same state as sex offenders	76	0	76	1	0	1
2 I am willing to live in the same city/town as sex offenders	76	0	76	1	0	2

3	I am willing to live in the same neighborhood as sex offenders	63	13	76	1.17	0.513158	3
4	I am willing to live the same building as sex offenders	38	37	76	1.49	1.973333	4
5	I am willing to work in the same organization as a sex offender	54	21	75	1.28	1.4	5
6	I am willing to be a close friend to a sex offender	27	48	75	1.64	3.84	6
7	I am willing to marry a sex offender	5	70	75	1.93	6.533333	7
Total						14.25982	28

Chart

Question four on Table five and seven show that 38 respondents reported they were willing to live in the same building as sex offenders as opposed to 37 who disagreed. The weighted response to question four was 1.973333 out of four. Question five results stated fifty-four respondents reported that were willing to work in the same organization as sex offenders. Twenty-one of the respondents reported they were not. The weighted response was 1.4 out of five. Question six asks respondents if they were willing to be a close friend to a sex offender. Forty-eight of the respondents reported that they were not willing to befriend a sex offender as opposed to the 27 who were willing. The weighted response calculated to 3.84 out of six. Lastly, question seven asks if the responded was willing to marry a sex offender. Seventy respondents reported that they were not willing to marry sex offender while five reported that they were. The final weighted response yielded 6.533333 out of seven.

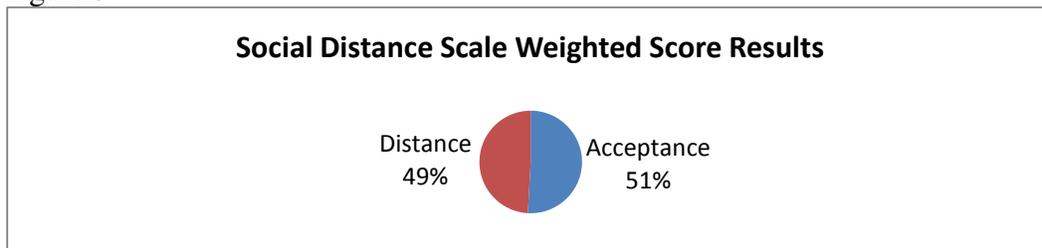
Figure 2  
Social Distance Scale Results



Bar graph

Applying Bogardus’ Social Distance theory, zero is assumed as a total social acceptance and 28 is assumed as total social distance. The total weighted response for the social distance scale was 14.25982 and indicated a 51% acceptance rate of sex offenders (see Appendix C, figure two). Questions four and five supported the null hypothesis that most human service workers were willing to live in the same building and work in the same organization. Questions six and seven support the researcher’s hypothesis that most human service workers were unwilling to be a close friend or marry a sex offender.

Figure 3



Pie Chart

### Discussion

The findings suggest that the majority of human service workers studied have had at least one contact with a person who has sexually offended in their professional lives. In addition to this, the majority of the sample did not check their local sex offender registries yearly as suggested by Burchfield & Mingus (2014). The majority of the sample somewhat agreed to civil commitments and to sex offender registries, while feeling neutral to law creation in order to manage existing sex offenders in the community. Lastly, using the social distance theory, the human service workers sampled reported they preferred a 49 percent social distance component from sex offenders within their communities.

A similar study was conducted in Israel that measured social distance using an amended Bogardus' social distance scale between therapists and university students regarding sex offenders. The study measured the distance between "willing to live in the same neighborhood" (the largest value) to "willing to marry" (the smallest value). The 2006 study concluded that 27 percent of the students studied were willing to live in the same neighborhood with sex offenders compared to .80 percent of students willing to marry a sex offender (Shechory & Idisis). Approximately 43 percent of therapists were willing to live in the same neighborhood as sex offenders compared to 2.31 percent willing to marry a sex offender. This is compared to the current sample. Eighty-two percent of human service workers were willing to live in the same neighborhood while only about six percent were willing to marry (Shechory & Idisis, 2006). This outlines the possible differences between Israeli culture and Western culture in regards to the preferred social distance between communities and sex offenders.

The same study measured the social distance between therapists and students versus victims of sexual assault. Ninety one percent of students responded that they were willing to live

in the same neighborhood as sexual assault victims while 38 percent were willing to marry a sexual assault victim. This again is compared to the therapist's responses. One-hundred percent of therapists were willing to live in the same neighborhood as sexual assault victims versus only 55 percent were willing to marry. The Israeli researchers presented a myth that sexual assault victims display behavior that "asks" for sexual perpetration and suggested that the myth is what creates the preferred social distance between the community and the victims (Shechory & Idisis, 2006). This still is evident even in the face that sex offenders were less desirable than their victim counterparts. Culture appears to have an impact on the range of social distance.

Communities continue to distance themselves from the sex offender population in order to protect themselves and their families from threat. According to the sample, the majority of human service workers accept half of the sex offender population back into their respective communities. Although problematic, this can be seen as a natural consequence for committing sex crimes. Natural consequences are sanctions that occur naturally without a single person or entity intervening. Logical consequences are sanctions that are predetermined by an authority figure (Allen & Boelter, 2008). For example, going outside in the cold without a coat on can result in frost bite. That is a natural consequence of deciding to not wear a jacket. This can also be applied to sex offenders. Molesting a child can cause social isolation across all relationships. That is a natural consequence of committing a sex crime. An example of a logical consequence can be seen in the issue of speeding. If one speeds, one is risking the chance of getting a speeding ticket. A person risks the chance of being registered as a sex offender as a result of molesting a child. Laws govern who can and cannot be placed on sex offender registries. This is referred to a logical consequence.

Registries are meant to be used to increase the knowledge of possible danger, but can be used to help create social distance as well. Despite this, evidence that support registries are effective is infrequent in literature (Tewksbury, 2006). Richard Zevitz and Mary Farkas, researchers from Marquette University in Wisconsin, found that registries increased the anxiety of community members (2000a). Naturally anxiety increases hyper-vigilance of one's safety. This in turn leads to measures that increase social distance and decrease sex offenders from fully integrating within. Little continues to be known of the effectiveness of registries (Tewksbury, 2006). The research supports the notion that most human service professionals do not use the registries as intended. What does this mean? The long term benefits and consequences to this are unknown. Social workers have an ethical value to support social justice (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). One may ask themselves if social workers could support justice for both vulnerable community members and parolees exiting in correctional systems on the basis that all human life has value.

Civil commitments, like the Minnesota Sex Offender Program, can be seen as the ultimate social distance tool during one's integration period back into society. The declaration that a person has a high probable chance of reoffending can be subjective in nature. Tools are used to help measure the risk level of sex offenders. An example of this is the Static 99R, a sexual violence risk assessment tool. An analysis conducted in 2013 determined that only a third of the assessment strongly predicts sexual recidivism (Brouillette-Alarie & Proulx). The other two components, general criminology and detachment had no connection of predicting sexual violence. In fact, the detachment component had no prediction validity at all for either non-violent sex crimes or non-sex crimes (Brouillette-Alarie & Proulx, 2013). The public may see civil commitments as further protection from those who determined to have a higher probability

of recidivism. Others continue to determine that the laws are detrimental to social justice practices for the removal of individual rights regarding “punishment” of crimes they have yet to commit. By measuring bias it appears that the majority of human service workers in the sample somewhat agree or feel neutral in support of civil commitment laws, thus neutral or slightly in favor in honoring social distance in their respective communities.

### **Limitations**

There are prevalent limitations present during the completion of this research. The first limitation is that the study sample is small to compare to the general human service professional population as a whole. The second limitation is that the human service workers involved in the study were a participant of one of the two forms of social media, Reddit.com and/or Facebook. It is not wise to assume that all human service workers participate within online media realms. The third limitation is that the topic of sex offenders is a very vulnerable subject to talk about, especially so for previous victims of sexual assault. There were many participants whom started, but did not complete the study.

### **Areas for Future Research**

There are several areas regarding the issue of sex offenders where research could be strengthened. The first area of future research is to determine how effective state registries are in keeping communities safe. There are few studies conducted with differing views on how well registries have managed since the 1990s. Registries are another effective tool in creating social distance. The second topic of future research is how personal bias regarding sex offenders reflects practice in the human service field. Human service workers are faced with clinical and community decisions that can have large impacts on micro, mezzo, and macro systems. It is recommended that additional research be completed that study this possible implication.

### **Conclusion**

Human service workers are encouraged to continue to reflect on their personal bias in order to remain neutral when working with sex offenders. This is the beginning to determine what meets the public and offenders needs regarding community supervision. Alternative programs to indefinite, inpatient civil commitments may be on the rise as Minnesota determines its fate of its Sex Offender Program. Social and human service workers will have a large impact on program creation based on evidence based practice methods. Not only are human service workers called to implement such programs, but they are called to maintain fair and unbiased treatment of their community's sex offenders. This way, human service workers have a justified part in reducing social barriers for its integrating sex offenders that lead to recidivism while continuing to keep communities safe.

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## Appendix A

## Consent Form

## Human Service Workers Professional Bias in Regards to Sex Offenders

I am conducting a study examining the personal bias regarding sex offenders within the human service worker community. A human service worker can be defined as a person who works in the field of meeting other people's needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base by increasing the quality of direct services, accessibility, coordination, and accountability of service professionals (National Organization for Human Services, 2014). If you self-identify as a human service worker, I invite you to participate in this research. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate.

This Study is being completed by Amanda Palmer, a social work graduate student with University of Saint Thomas/ Saint Catherine University in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine human service worker's personal bias in relation to sex offenders. This information will be used to examine further issues of public fear, growing legislature and recidivism. For purposes of this study, I am interested in gaining participants that self-identify as human service workers only.

**Procedure:**

You will be asked to complete a 13 question survey relating to your personal opinion and bias in regards to the sex offender community. This survey is expected to take 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The data collected will be analyzed by myself and reviewed by three committee chair members. Finally, the data will be finalized and presented in May 2015 in adherence to University of St. Thomas/St Catherine University graduate school of social work requirements. No identifying information will be shared in the research paper or to committee chair members.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are no associated benefits participating in this survey; however, there are risks. Due to the nature of measuring personal bias regarding sex offenders, those who are sensitive regarding the topic of sex offender sanctions and/or sexual violence may be triggered by taking this survey. Those who are highly triggered by these topics are encouraged to disengage from participating. You will not be penalized and may withdraw at anytime. In the event you become uncomfortable due to the survey content, please disengage. The resources listed below are available to those who have may need additional support.

US National Sexual Assault Hotline – 1-800-656-HOPE

US Department of Defense Safe Helpline– 1-877-995-5247

Rape, Abuse, Incest, National Network (RAINN) - [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

### **Voluntary Nature of Study:**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can skip questions or quit taking the survey at any time. Your decision to choose not to participate in the survey will not be penalized by either University of St Thomas/St Catherine University or myself. If you chose to withdraw, the data collected may or may not be used in the study.

### **Questions or Concerns:**

My name is Amanda Palmer. Feel free to contact me before taking the survey if you have questions. My email is [palm6179@stthomas.edu](mailto:palm6179@stthomas.edu). You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 to address questions or concerns.

**Please print and/or save a copy of this information for your personal records.**

### **Statement of Consent**

I am consenting to participate in the above study. I have read the consent form and have no further questions to taking the survey. Submitting the survey will constitute as agreement to the above terms of consent.

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Appendix B  
Survey Questions

Table 1

	<b>Please respond to the following statements:</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
1.	I self-identify as a human service worker.		
2.	As a human service worker I have worked with at least one person who had sexually offended in the past.		
3.	Within the past year, I have checked my local sex offender registry notification website and located the sex offenders residing in my area.		

Table 2

	<b>Please respond if you agree to the following statements</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>
4.	I support sex offender registries					
5.	There needs to be more laws in place to manage the sex offenders living in my area					
6.	I support indefinite civil commitments for eligible sex offenders upon release from prison.  <i>(Note: Civil commitments mandate the person to attend treatment and/or live in a residential treatment center indefinitely.)</i>					

Table 3

	<b>Please respond to the following statement</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
7.	I am willing to live in the same state as sex offenders		
8.	I am willing to live in the same city/town as sex offenders		
9.	I am willing to live in the same neighborhood as sex offenders		
10.	I am willing to live the same building as sex offenders		

11.	I am willing to work in the same organization as a sex offender		
12.	I am willing to be a close friend to a sex offender		
13.	I am willing to marry a sex offender		