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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* on 05/14/2020, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1733698>

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Exploring the Attitudes and Knowledge of Political Decision-Makers

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Author Redacted (2018):

Jung, S., Allison, M., & Martin, E. (2018). Perspectives of Americans and Canadians on the use and function of sex offender registries. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 52, 106-117. doi:10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2017.10.003

Abstract

Sex offender registries (SORs) were established due to policies and practices intended to protect the public from individuals who commit sexually violent acts, and yet the empirical literature does not show that public SORs reduce or prevent sexual crimes. Given that politicians prominently influence SOR policies, the current study explores the views of SORs by 26 political decision-makers from Canada and the U.S. Participants completed a survey on their opinions regarding SORs and their knowledge of SOR eligibility. Attitudes and political perspectives were assessed to examine their association with SOR opinions. Almost two thirds of those surveyed believed SORs should be publicly available and a third believed SORs helped to protect the public. These beliefs were associated with those with conservative-leaning political views. These findings help us to explore the perspectives of political decision-makers and gain insight into attitudinal factors that may play a role in influencing opinions regarding SORs.

Keywords: sex offender registry, attitudes, politicians, sexual offenders, community safety, attitudes, opinions

Ethical standards

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee [insert as appropriate] and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Despite the advances in our understanding, assessment, and management of individuals who sexually offend, the community reacts to these individuals with strong emotions and tremendous disdain. Sexual violence policies tend to be polarized between scientific discovery and emotional reactivity. The establishment of sex offender registries (SORs) in various countries, including Canada and the United States, was initially well-intentioned to protect the community from dangerous and violent sexual predators (Lobanov-Rostovsky & Harris, 2016). However, SORs have become overly inclusive regarding who is placed on them and they have been used by vigilantes to target individuals without the full knowledge of what the individual had done to be placed on the SOR (e.g., one-size-fits-all model; Lobanov-Rostovsky & Harris, 2016). For example, the courts may order an individual to be placed on an SOR whether the person penetrated a pre-pubescent child or publicly urinated near a school. The egregiousness of the former over the latter examples are not delineated into any meaningful groupings when placed in an SOR. Rather, the mere fact that the criminal codes in each respective country outlines that the individuals in each scenario have committed a sexual offence automatically makes them eligible for registration. As a result, the public is blind to crime severity and therefore see the SOR simply as a list of offenders who have committed sex crimes. The risk that the offender poses to the community is not what community members see.

In Canada, there are two registries (Ontario Sex Offender Registry, OSOR; National Sex Offender Registry, NSOR), which are not available to the public, and both were implemented to assist law enforcement agencies in their investigations of sexual

violence cases (Murphy, Fedoroff, & Martineau, 2009). The Canadian government contemplated the implementation of a public registry for sex offenders, under what they called the "Sexual Predators Act" (Connolly, 2014), but this amendment has yet to be put into place. In the United States, each state has its own sex offender registry and the information on these registries is made available to the public (Ackerman, Harris, Levenson, & Zgoba, 2011). As argued elsewhere (Author Redacted, 2018; Lobanov-Rostovsky & Harris, 2016), the impetus for developing sex offender registries typically originates from significant community concerns about offenders committing new sex offences. As a result, the hope is that implementation of the registry will ensure public safety. Much is already known that partisanship plays a strong mediator role in shaping attitudes and consequently policies (see Blank & Shaw, 2015; Suhay & Druckman, 2015, for further discussion). Consequently, vote-eligible citizens influence decision makers who have an impact on policies and laws. The unfortunate problem with the influential role of partisanship and community opinions is that less weight is placed on sound policy decisions and scientific knowledge. Instead, emotional reactance to news stories about a sexual crime often takes precedent.

Despite the intended purposes of developing SORs, the benefits of SORs are not well-supported by existing empirical literature. This lack of support may be attributed to the well-documented negative impact on sex offenders when reintegrating into the community. Often there are unintended collateral consequences and emotional difficulties for offenders. A study conducted in Florida revealed that sex offenders identified stress, fear, or shame associated with community notification and over a third of offenders reported that notification led to negative events, such as the loss of a job or their home (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Zevitz and Farkas (2000) reported that sex

offenders in Wisconsin experienced negative consequences of their registration when trying to obtain housing and employment. Similar findings are mirrored in several studies, showing that registered male and female sex offenders have experienced job loss, loss of friends and support persons, harassment, and residence relocation as a result of their registration on public SORs (e.g., Ackerman, Sacks, & Osier, 2013; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Tewksbury, 2004, 2006).

These reintegration obstacles are serious concerns because these difficulties are associated with an increased likelihood of recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 2000). These concerns have also been identified by mental health professionals who work with this population of offenders (Malesky & Keim, 2001). Hence, the registries may not fulfill their purpose, which is to protect the public and instead may increase the risk of reoffending. Furthermore, a survey study by Craun and Simmons (2012) found that abuse survivors expressed support for SORs, but acknowledged that SORs create a false sense of security that may not actually relieve risk or increase reports of sexual abuse. These findings may be more pronounced in the United States due to the public nature of their SORs. Though research in Canada is limited to one study, the findings suggest that the non-public SOR in Canada has little to no impact on reintegration into the community (Murphy & Fedoroff, 2013).

Literature on public perceptions of the criminal justice system shows that the public is generally more concerned with the leniency of the criminal justice system than it is with its severity (Ahn-Redding, Allison, Semon, & Jung, 2013; Jung, Ahn-Redding, & Allison, 2014; Roberts, Crutcher, & Verbrugge, 2007). Hence, policies or structures that appear to control the whereabouts of sexual offenders, such as SORs, are often

welcomed by the public. There is often an “us vs. them” perspective to issues regarding sexual offenders that tends to suggest that individuals with this offending history are “not like us”. Therefore, the public perspective may be more supportive of strict and confining policies when addressing the management of sexual offenders in the community.

Consistent with these general views of sexual offenders, a growing body of literature shows that public perceptions of SORs lean towards support of such structures. A study carried out with university and community samples of participants revealed that compared to Canadians, Americans were more endorsing of an SOR that was accessible to the public, which is consistent with U.S. laws (Author Redacted, 2018). More remarkable was that Americans were better at identifying specific situations that warranted placement on the SORs (i.e., detailed scenarios were provided and participants were asked to evaluate the eligibility of the perpetrator for placement on the SOR). In contrast, Canadians were more punitive in their evaluations of sexual offence perpetrators, and more stereotypical in their views of sexual offenders (i.e., predatory and unable to control their offending behavior). In addition to the lay public, views of law enforcement have been examined. Tewksbury and Mustaine (2013) reported that, although most law enforcement officers (62.1%) did not believe that SORs effectively prevented sexual offending, two thirds (63.1%) reported that all sex offenders should be placed on an SOR and over 85% of those that support SORs believed the individual’s name, photograph, and home address should be reported on the registry. A more recent comprehensive endeavor (i.e., 1247 police officers representing 49 states) by Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky, and Levenson (2015) reported that 54.2% of law enforcement officers believed that the SOR in their own state was

effective in reducing reoffending and 74.8% expressed a concern that the SOR was too limited (i.e., registry should be expanded to include information on a broader range of offenders).

An unfortunate consequence of SORs is that the mere potential of being placed on an SOR could influence decision making by the judiciary. Letourneau, Levenson, Bandyopadhyay, Armstrong, and Sinha (2010) examined judicial decision making concerning adult sex crime cases in South Carolina before and after SOR implementation. They found that there were more cases of sexual offending that were plead down to lesser charges after the implementation of the SOR in the state, perhaps to avoid being placed on an SOR. What is unfortunate is that plea bargains that lead to nonsex convictions may lead to a reduced opportunity for the offender to complete sex offence-specific treatment.

The views of politicians on sex offender policies were examined among a small sample of 25 politicians in the U.S. Meloy, Boatwright, and Curtis (2013) found that U.S. politicians had more negative attitudes towards rehabilitation of sexual offenders than those who worked in the criminal justice system, despite similar proportions of each group believing that laws served to increase public safety. Their findings lead to concerns about their devaluation of rehabilitation and preference for punitive sanctions, especially in light of studies that show that personal opinions of public officials have a significant influence on legislative decisions (e.g., Sample & Kadleck, 2008).

At present, there remains starkly different reasons for the development of these registries in the U.S. and Canada, which leads to the current endeavour. The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of politicians who have a direct impact on policies that influence the implementation and sustainability of SORs. Existing research

has surveyed community members and other criminal justice professionals' perspectives, but few have examined politicians who have the ability to impact the use and development of SORs. Through an empirical analysis of responses, we hope to gain a better understanding of the knowledge and perspectives of political members on SORs and the role that personal attitudes play in affecting these perspectives.

Method

Participants

Twenty-six political members from Canada and the U.S. participated in the study. Ten participants were from the U.S. (38.5%), and 16 participants were from Canada (61.5%). Participants included political members from municipal ($n = 18$, 69%), provincial or state-level ($n = 5$, 19%), and federal governments ($n = 2$, 7%), while one participant did not indicate which level of government. The distribution of age was as follows: 18 to 35 years ($n = 1$, 3.8%), 36 to 55 years ($n = 12$, 46.2%), and 56 to 75 years ($n = 13$, 50%). Most of the participants were male ($n = 21$, 80.8%), while 19.2% ($n = 5$) were female. A majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian ($n = 24$, 92.3%), with only one participant identifying as Black (3.8%) and one as Asian (3.8%). With regards to education, one participant completed high school (3.8%) and most completed post-secondary education, which included a technical certificate ($n = 9$, 34.6%), associate degree ($n = 2$, 7.7%), undergraduate degree ($n = 3$, 11.5%), and graduate or professional degree ($n = 11$, 42.3%).

Questionnaire and Procedure

The survey was comprised of four sections (for a copy of the full questionnaire, contact first or second author): (a) demographic information, (b) seven questions concerning participants' perspectives on SORs rated on a 5-point Likert scale, (c)

participants' factual knowledge of their country's SOR, and (d) specific attitudinal measures.

The demographic section asked participants basic questions about themselves (age, gender, race, education, socioeconomic status) and their role in making legislative decisions and setting policy (i.e., their job title and the jurisdiction they were responsible for). The second section asked participants several questions concerning their views of SORs (e.g., should they be available to law enforcement/to the public; do they prevent sexual recidivism) and their perception of who should be placed on an SOR. Participants were required to respond using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely not/definitely should not) to 5 (definitely yes/definitely should be).

The third section assessed participants' perceptions of who should be on the registry, using 11 brief scenarios rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Eight of the scenarios involved individuals who would be placed on the registry in both countries (e.g., A man stalked an 11-year-old and tried to lure her into his car while she walked home from school; A young man buys comics books that depict young children being sexually abused). Three scenarios described individuals whose actions would not lead to them being placed on the registry in either country (e.g., An 18-year-old girl had sex with her 15-year-old boyfriend; A 15-year-old boy's aunt posts naked photos of him when he was little on Facebook). Participants' evaluations of these scenarios were later scored for accuracy by dichotomously assigning '1' when the choice was in the correct direction for the furthest two points and '0' for all other responses (e.g., if the correct decision was that the scenario would indeed lead to the individual being placed on the SOR, then definitely yes and probably yes would be replaced with a score of '1' and all other responses would be deemed '0'). To obtain an overall accuracy score, the

dichotomized scores were totaled with a few of the items reverse-coded (i.e., there were 3 scenarios where the individual would not be placed on the registry, and therefore the correct response would be 'probably' or 'definitely' not be put on the registry). The total number of accurately categorized items (i.e., would be placed on the SOR vs. would not be placed on the SOR) were summed and divided by the total number of items (11), producing a percentage accuracy. This percentage accuracy represented participants' factual knowledge of their country's SOR.

In the fourth section, participants completed three attitudinal measures. The 18-item *Belief in a Just World Scale* (BJWS; Rubin & Peplau, 1975) measures people's tendency to believe good things happen to good people. High scores tend to be associated with more politically conservative views. The *Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders Scale* (CATSO; Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008) measures people's attitudes towards sex offenders, with higher scores indicating more negative offender views. The 18 items form four CATSO scales that assess perceptions of sex offenders as isolative loners lacking in social skills (social isolation), as unwilling or unable to control their sexual behavior and who therefore are deserving of severe punishment and infringement of their civil rights (incapacity to change), as predatory individuals who use force and manipulation in offending (severity/dangerousness), and as being hypersexual (deviancy). The *Survey of Political Attitudes* (SPA; Lyle & Smith, 2012) measures people's political leanings (liberal-conservative) with higher scores indicating more liberal tendencies. The 15 items of the SPA form a total score and three subscale scores representing degree of liberal views for individual rights, political compassion, and wealth distribution. Finally, before concluding the study, participants were asked to indicate whether they were aware of sex offender registries in their

country prior to completing the survey, and whether they themselves or someone close to them is a survivor of a sexual offence.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained by the institutional ethics review boards from each institution where the first and second authors are employed. The informed consent process and the administration of the survey to participants was conducted using Qualtrics survey software, which is an online survey platform. At the end of the survey, participants were provided with a debriefing page with further information on how to contact the researchers and were reminded about the overall purpose of the study. The following describes the recruitment procedure for each sample.

Participants were asked for their participation via an e-mail that provided a brief overview of the research study and a link to the survey. Given the difficulty in obtaining responses from a professional sample such as politicians, these participants were told they would have the opportunity to enter into a drawing for a gift card as incentive for their participation. Each participant was sent three e-mails in total: the initial e-mail asking for their participation and two subsequent reminder e-mails. Those who chose to participate were re-directed to Qualtrics and were required to read a consent form and indicate consent before completing the survey. The entire survey took approximately 30 minutes, and the participant was directed to a debriefing page and presented the opportunity to enter their email in a separate survey screen to win a gift card.

Both Canadian and American participants completed the same survey and potential participants were drawn from online government staff directories. In Canada, these included city council, Members of the Legislative Assembly (provincial), and

Members of Parliament (federal), along with advocacy offices and agencies that have been involved with legislative reform. In the US, these included the Attorney General (state), the Governor's office (state), members of the General Assembly (House and Senate), the Board of Commissioners (county), the Mayor's office and city council, as well as several state agencies like the State Bureau of Investigation. The contact information for many of these offices are available publicly through their Internet websites. A stakeholder was eligible for participation if their contact information (i.e., e-mail address) was readily available and it was indicated that they spoke English. In Canada, a total of 278 Canadian politicians were solicited for their participation, and 16 completed the survey (response rate of 5.8%). The U.S. sample included solicitation of 243 potential participants and 10 completed the survey (response rate of 4.1%). We had hoped to conduct comparative analyses between politicians in each respective country. However, considering the low response rate, we were unable to compare the Canadian and U.S. sample of politicians with enough statistical power. We combined stakeholder participants from both countries and examined their overall opinions on SORs and residential restrictions.

Results

Our goal was to examine the knowledge and perceptions of politicians on SORs in their respective countries. We specifically wanted to examine whether their perspectives on SORs as measured by survey data would be associated with their general attitudinal characteristics and accuracy of knowledge about eligibility for registration.

Intercorrelations were calculated on each attitudinal scale and subscale and are presented in Table 1. Higher scores on the BJW scale were significantly correlated with

Table 1

Intercorrelations among the total and scale scores of three attitudinal measures, BJW, CATSO, and SPA

Total and scale scores of attitudinal measures	CATSO				SPA			
	SI	IC	SD	DV	IR	PC	WD	Total
BJW Total Score	.140	.278	.488*	.255	-.318	-.417*	-.143	-.324
CATSO Social Isolation (SI)		.216	.279	.442*	-.077	-.153	-.158	-.148
CATSO Incapacity to Change (IC)			.102	.142	-.492*	-.507**	-.766***	-.687***
CATSO Severity/Dangerous (SD)				.519**	-.150	-.350	-.143	-.238
CATSO Deviancy (DV)					-.223	-.131	-.041	-.150
SPA Individual Rights (IR)						.665***	.683***	.904***
SPA Political Compassion (PC)							.547**	.830***
SPA Wealth Distribution (WD)								.870***
SPA Total Score								

Note. Pearson correlation coefficients reported in the table. BJW = Belief in a Just World measure; CATSO = Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders measure; SPA = Survey of Political Attitudes measure. $N = 26$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

stronger perceptions of sexual offenders as predatory individuals who are dangerous and conservative views on minimum wage, the environment, military action, and universal health care (i.e., SPA political compassion subscale). On the CATSO subscales, only significant correlations were found between perceptions that sexual offenders are hypersexual (deviancy) and two scales where sexual offenders are perceived as loners without social skills (social isolation) and perceived as predatory individuals who use force and manipulation in offending (severity/dangerous). On the SPA measure, all subscales were significantly and positively correlated with the total score and each of the other SPA subscales. Also, the SPA total and all four subscales are negatively correlated with perceptions of sexual offenders as incapable of change (CATSO incapacity to change), indicating that strongly liberal views were associated with the belief that sexual offenders are capable of change.

Opinions on SORs. Overall opinions from participants in Canada and the U.S. were examined. Descriptive information is provided in Table 2. The findings indicate that nearly all of the participants believed that SORs should be available to law enforcement (96.2%), and many believed that SORs should be available to the public (61.5%). However, less than half believed that SORs help to protect the public (38.5%) and even fewer believed that SORs help prevent sexual offenders from committing sexual offences (7.7%) or non-sexual offences (26.9%). When asked if they believed SORs helped offenders live in the community, very few endorsed this belief (11.5%). We also asked a separate question regarding whether politicians believed that sexual offenders should have residential restrictions placed on them and 76.9% reported that they agreed or partly agreed.

When the means for each opinion are compared to the views of community

Table 2

Descriptive information about opinions of participants on sex offender registries

Opinions about SORs	Politicians		Community ^a	<i>t</i> -test (prob)	<i>Cohen's</i> <i>d</i>
	% said yes	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
1. Should SORs be available to the public	61.5% (16)	3.7 (1.35)	4.2 (1.06)	2.33 (.020)	0.42
2. Should SORs be available to law enforcement	96.2% (25)	4.8 (0.51)	4.7 (0.81)	0.62 (.533)	0.10
3. Do SORs protect the general public	38.5% (10)	3.2 (1.08)	3.7 (1.03)	2.42 (.016)	0.47
4. Do SORs help offenders live in the community	11.5% (3)	2.2 (1.05)	2.5 (1.07)	1.40 (.161)	0.28
5. Do SORs prevent commission of sex offences	7.7% (2)	2.3 (1.01)	2.6 (1.10)	1.37 (.172)	0.28
6. Do SORs prevent commission of non-sex offences	26.9% (7)	1.9 (0.91)	2.3 (1.07)	1.87 (.061)	0.40
7. Should sex offenders have residential restrictions	76.9% (20)	4.0 (1.08)	4.3 (0.96)	1.55 (.121)	0.29

Note. Means and standard deviations are provided for each opinion using a Likert scale ranging from definitely no (1) to definitely yes (5). Percentages (frequencies in parentheses) refer to participants who said probably or definitely yes is combined in the last column. *N* = 26. ^aData from study by Author Redacted (2018) with a community sample of 637 participants.

members from both respective countries as reported in a previous study (Author Redacted, 2018), we found two significant differences emerged. Politicians were less inclined to support SOR availability to the public than community members, $t(661) = 2.33$, Cohen's $d = 0.42$. Also, politicians were less likely to believe that SORs help to protect the general public than community members, $t(661) = 2.42$, Cohen's $d = 0.47$. No differences were found between our sample of politicians and the previously reported community sample for opinions that SORs should be available to law enforcement (average was high for both, 4.8 and 4.7 out of possible 5, respectively), help offenders live in the community, and prevent commission of sexual and non-sexual offences. Views regarding whether sex offenders should have residential restrictions did not differ as scores seem to fall in the higher range (4.0 and 4.3, respectively), suggesting that participants generally believed offenders should have such restrictions.

Opinion Correlates. To further examine what attitudinal variables may correlate with stakeholder opinions, we conducted Spearman correlational analyses between the responses on each opinion question and each scale and subscale measuring just world (BJW), attitudes towards sexual offenders (CATSO), and political attitudes (SPA).

Correlation coefficients are reported in Table 3.

The total score from the BJW scale was positively correlated with views about SORs helping offenders live in the community, indicating that the more one believes that people get what they deserve, the more they believe that SORs help offenders reside in the community ($r = .481$). Further, the BJW was positively correlated with views on residential restrictions, suggesting that the more one believes that people get what they deserve, the more they believed that sex offenders should be restricted in

Table 3

Correlations between the attitudinal measures and perspectives and accuracy of SORs

Attitudinal measures	Opinions about SORs							1% accuracy
	1. Available to the public	2. Available to law enforcement	3. Protects general public	4. Helps offenders live in community	5. Prevents sex offences committed	6. Prevents non-sex offences committed	7. Residential restrictions	
BJW Total Score	.265	.274	.259	.481*	.237	.325	.417*	.175
CATSO								
Social Isolation	-.042	.084	-.177	.395*	-.049	.227	.074	-.019
Capacity to Change	.646***	.627***	.511**	.364	.161	.350	.661***	.488*
Severity/Dangerous	.156	.163	.204	.349	.387	.223	.374	.281
Deviancy	-.003	.189	.110	.344	.240	-.034	.313	.034
SPA Total Score	-.505**	-.558**	-.363	-.511**	-.054	-.375	-.654***	-.433*
Individual Rights	-.417*	-.583**	-.213	-.398*	.021	-.239	-.642***	-.349
Political Compassion	-.442*	-.430*	-.348	-.493*	-.111	-.412*	-.503**	-.541**
Wealth Distribution	-.592***	-.599***	-.417*	-.502**	.000	-.330	-.582**	-.267

Note. Spearman's correlations coefficients are reported for 7 opinions about SORs and Pearson's correlations are reported for percentage accuracy on 11 scenarios. BJW = Belief in a Just World measure; CATSO = Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders measure; SPA = Survey of Political Attitudes measure. $N = 26$. * $p < .01$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. ¹Percentage correct for the sample was 72% ($SD = 17\%$).

where they live ($r = .417$).

When the CATSO was examined, the Social Isolation and Capacity to Change subscales demonstrated positive correlations with a few of the politicians' opinions. The Social Isolation subscale correlated with views that SORs help offenders reside in the community, showing the more one views sex offenders as isolative loners lacking in social skills, the more SORs are perceived as helpful to offenders who reside in the community ($r = .395$). The Capacity to Change subscale was significantly and positively associated with several scales, indicating that the more one perceives sex offenders as unwilling or unable to control their sexual behavior, therefore deserving of severe punishment and infringement of their civil rights, the more one believes SORs (1) should be available to the public ($r = .646$), (2) should be available to law enforcement ($r = .627$), (3) help protect the public ($r = .511$), and (4) residential restrictions should be placed on sex offenders ($r = .661$). The CATSO subscales, Severity/Dangerous (i.e., perception of sex offenders as predatory individuals who use force and manipulation in offending) and Deviancy (i.e., view of sex offenders as being hypersexual), were not associated with any of the opinions about SORs.

Correlations between the SPA total score and three subscales with the seven opinion questions were examined. The overall SPA total was significantly and negatively correlated with three perspectives about the SOR, indicating overall liberal perspectives were related to views that SORs should not be made available to the public ($r = -.505$), should not be available to police ($r = -.558$), and do not help offenders reside in the community ($r = -.511$). Further, liberal views were associated with beliefs that residential restrictions should not be placed on offenders ($r = -.654$).

Subscales measuring liberal perspectives about individual rights (i.e., views on

abortion rights, legalization of marijuana, separation of church and state, and same-sex marriage), political compassion (i.e., views on minimum wage, the environment, military action, and universal health care), and wealth distribution (i.e., views on taxation, government spending, and social security) were correlated with several opinions. Liberal views on all three subscales were associated with less support for making SORs available to the public (r 's = -.417, -.442, and -.592, respectively) or law enforcement (r 's = -.583, -.430, and -.599, respectively), the view that SORs help offenders live in the community (r 's = -.398, -.493, and -.502, respectively), and the view that residential restrictions should be placed on sex offenders (r 's = -.642, -.503, and -.582, respectively). Furthermore, the liberal-leaning perspective of political compassion was negatively correlated with the opinion that SORs prevent non-sexual offences ($r = -.412$), and liberal-leaning perspective of wealth distribution was negatively correlated with the opinion that SORs protect the public ($r = -.417$).

Perceptions of SOR eligibility. To see if accuracy of identifying specific scenarios as SOR-relevant is associated with attitudinal constructs, Spearman's correlation coefficients were calculated. Before conducting the overall analyses, we first conducted means comparisons between politicians from the U.S. and Canada to ensure there were no differences in percentage accuracy and found that no significant differences emerged. Overall, the average percentage accuracy was 72% (out of 11 scenarios of SOR eligibility, range of accuracy from 3 to 10 with $M = 7.92$, $SD = 1.85$).

As seen in the last column on Table 3, the BJW scale was not significantly associated with percentage accuracy. Of the CATSO subscales, only Capacity to Change was positively correlated with accuracy ($r = .488$), indicating that the more one views sex offenders as unwilling or unable to control their sexual behavior, the more

accurate one is at identifying cases that would be placed on a SOR. For the SPA measure, the total score ($r = -.433$) and the political compassion subscale ($r = -.541$) was negatively correlated with accuracy, suggesting that the more liberal one is, the less accurate one is at identifying SOR-eligible cases.

Discussion

The original goal of this research was to examine the perspectives of Canadian and American politicians who have a direct impact on policies that influence the implementation and sustainability of SORs. Initially, our planned analyses included a comparison between the Canadian and American samples; however, this was abandoned given the small sample size. Despite this limitation, it is important to note that, although the response rate in our study was quite low (5.8% of Canadian and 4.1% U.S. policymakers who were solicited responded to our survey), other studies with similar recruitment strategies (i.e., email correspondence) that were carried out in the U.S. had rates as low as 4% (e.g., Hanania, 2016). Nonetheless, the analyses offered in this paper are exploratory in nature.

Our study revealed that, of our sample, two thirds of politicians endorsed views that SORs should be made available to the public and nearly all said that SORs should be available to law enforcement. Despite these beliefs in making SORs more available, most of our participating politicians did not believe that SORs helped to prevent sexual or non-sexual offences from being committed. Percentages were similar to those of other criminal justice professionals, particularly police officers surveyed in past studies. A small proportion of surveyed police officers (23.3%) believed that SORs deterred sexual offending (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013), while a slightly higher proportion, although still half or less, believed SORs prevented reoffending (54.2%, Harris et al.,

2015; 37.9%, Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). These numbers contrast from community member studies, where a larger proportion believed that SORs helped to prevent sexual offending (64%, Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009). It is then curious why politicians, along with other criminal justice professionals, seem to support SORs when they do not always perceive SORs to be related to reductions in sexual crimes. It is possible that there are other reasons for politicians' endorsement of SOR availability to the public, and particularly to law enforcement. Such reasons may be less focused on rehabilitation or management of offenders, which would seemingly lead to reductions in sexual violence, and more focused on punitive reasons (e.g., may believe that sexual offenders should be monitored as part of their loss of freedom for their crimes). Reasons could also be related to listening to the concerns of the public and hence supporting the public's view that SORs should be made public. Further studies examining these reasons are needed.

When politicians were asked about their views regarding residential restrictions placed on sexual offenders, a large proportion agreed that they should have such conditions. This latter finding was interesting in light of the empirical evidence that shows residential restrictions do not have an impact on reducing sexual crimes (e.g., Mercado et al., 2008). Other studies have found that half or more of criminal justice professionals, such as police (70.6%, Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013), correctional staff (50.4%, Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Payne, 2011) and parole board members (42.3%, Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012), believe that residential restrictions helped to prevent offenders from victimizing others. When told that there is no scientific evidence to support residential restrictions, more police (81.5%; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013) still supported the policy and the number of correctional staff (41.5%; Tewksbury et al.,

2011) and parole board members (36.6%; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012) who supported it was slightly reduced. A more recent study by Harris et al. (2015) found that 26.7% of the police surveyed said residential restriction laws should be expanded and/or applied to a larger group of offenders. There seems to be a tendency for criminal justice professionals, along with politicians in the current study, to support the use of residential restrictions in managing sexual offenders. In contrast, less than half (37%) of community members in Schiavone and Jeglic's study (2009) endorsed the effectiveness of such restrictions in reducing sexual crime.

Opinions about SORs may be influenced by a number of factors. Our findings suggest that attitudinal variables may play a role. When we examine the attitudinal tendency to believe that people get what they deserve, those with strong 'just world' beliefs tend to justify SORs as being helpful to sexual offenders. This perspective seems to differ somewhat community members, 'just world' beliefs were shown to be associated with believing SORs protect the public and prevent sexual offending (Author Redacted, 2018). Albeit preliminary, given the sample size, the findings suggest there may be a different reasoning for politicians who support SORs in that policies are actually helping offenders rather than hindering them. Politicians who view sexual offenders as isolated loners were more likely to believe that SORs help offenders live in the community. Furthermore, when politicians viewed sexual offenders as unwilling to or unable to control their sexual behavior, they tended to also view SORs as a protection for the community, endorsed sharing SORs as a protection for the community and with law enforcement, and believing residential restrictions were important in managing sexual offenders. These findings were consistent with the associations found in a community sample (Author Redacted, 2018). Oddly, we found that attitudes towards

sexual offenders had no associations with believing whether SORs prevented sexual and non-sexual offences. Lastly, an association was found between viewing sexual offenders as incapable of change and accurately identifying sexual crimes that would be placed on the SOR.

Given the plethora of research examining the influence of political attitudes on policies and receptiveness to scientific knowledge (e.g., Blank & Shaw, 2015; Suhay & Druckman, 2015), we examined the association between political perspectives and opinions about SORs. Overall, we found that liberal-leaning attitudes (SPA) were associated with views that SORs are not helpful (i.e., for offenders to live in the community and preventing offending) and should not be made available to the public or law enforcement. Furthermore, liberal attitudes were also associated with the tendency to be less supportive of residential restrictions. Our findings are consistent with a recent study that found right-wing conservatism to be a strong predictor of negative attitudes towards sexual offenders (e.g., recidivism, social distancing, etc.; DeLuca et al., 2019). Contrary to expectation, our study also showed that accurately identifying sexual crimes that would be placed on the SOR was associated with more conservative attitudes. However, a limitation of our study is that a larger proportion of scenarios were in the affirmative direction (i.e., saying 'yes' about a case was more likely to lead to a correct response); hence, it would be expected that more conservative-leaning politicians would tend to guess that most cases involving sexual relations would lead to the individual on an SOR and liberal-leaning politicians would tend to be more cautious when guessing about a case.

In addition to attitudinal reasons, there may be other factors that play a role influencing opinions about sexual offender policies and legislation. An unfortunate but

common finding is the tendency for those who do not directly carry out professional work with sexual offenders to view them as a homogeneous group. In their survey of Florida residents, Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, and Baker (2007) found that there was a consistency in how residents viewed sexual offender reoffending behavior as homogeneous regardless of their risk level. Similar findings can be seen in several studies in Canada and abroad (e.g., Olver & Barlow, 2010; Willis, Malinen, & Johnston, 2013). Other research has noted that the usage of SORs may play a role in advocating for SORs. In a recent survey, Harris and Cudmore (2018) found that one in ten respondents who actually accessed an SOR said that the SOR made them feel much safer. They particularly noted in their study that community members who were more likely to access an SOR were more likely to perceive registry information as very useful, although they also added that their community participants rarely used SORs for any particular purpose beyond curiosity. Spoo et al. (2019) further examined whether the experience of victimization may play a role influencing perspectives on sexual offenders and policies and found no difference when it came to residential restrictions. Hence, personal and political attitudes may play an influential role on how one views residential restrictions for sexual offenders.

Limitations and Future Directions

Unfortunately, the response rate in our study was lower than what we had expected, although rates were comparable to studies using similar recruitment strategies (e.g., Hanania, 2016). An older study carried out in the U.S. used postal delivery of surveys and obtained a higher rate (25%) of responding by politicians solicited (Reutzell, Hollingsworth, & Cox, 1996), and higher rates of over 50% are seen when surveys are delivered by post in other countries, such as those in Scandinavia

(e.g., Finland, 52%, Simonsen-Rehn, Laamanen, Brommels, & Suominen, 2012; Sweden, 51%, Sydsjö, Josefsson, Bladh, Muhrbeck, & Sydsjö, 2012). Hence, the use of the digital correspondence seems to yield less responding, and future studies may yield greater responses with more traditional and older methods, such a postal correspondence or phone calling. Another concern regarding survey studies is the self-selection of participants. Those who responded may be a select group of politicians with a laudable willingness to share their views, regardless of how they may be perceived. Finally, with a larger sample, it would be important to examine the differences between politicians' perspectives in Canada and in the U.S., given the notable difference in how the SORs are employed in each country (i.e., publicly available in the U.S.), and to further examine the reasons for their perspectives.

Conclusion

Political decision-makers have the largest influence on whether sexual offender laws and legislation reflect sound policies that are supported by scientific knowledge. Past research and the exploratory contribution from the current study show that attitudinal factors play a role in influencing opinions about policies, such as SORs and the continued use of residential restrictions in monitoring sexual offenders. Changing such attitudinal factors may be challenging. Issues such as abortion and immigration have been examined among various politicians, and researchers have highlighted that there is a reluctance to commit themselves on such 'hot topic' issues, which are seen as contentious (Smith & Womack, 2015; Sydsjö et al., 2012). Given the unsavoriness of revising sexual offender policies by applying evidence-based practices that tend towards rehabilitation and less punitive processes, one could easily see a parallel with other 'hot topic' issues. It is hoped that this exploratory study provides some impetus

for further study of politicians' perspectives. Moreover, a better understanding of their attitudes and what may influence their attitudes could lead to more effective strategies for knowledge translation and facilitate movement in taking empirical information into actual practice and policy implementation.

Acknowledgments

We thank Elon University and MacEwan University's Research Office for their support of this research, and are grateful to Dr. David Buck for his help implementing the survey.

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Sandy Jung has declared no conflicts of interest

Meredith Allison has declared no conflicts of interest

Carissa Toop has declared no conflicts of interest

Erin Martin has declared no conflicts of interest

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Table 1

Intercorrelations among the total and scale scores of three attitudinal measures, BJW, CATSO, and SPA

Total and scale scores of attitudinal measures	CATSO				SPA			Total
	SI	IC	SD	DV	IR	PC	WD	
BJW Total Score	.140	.278	.488*	.255	-.318	-.417*	-.143	-.324
CATSO Social Isolation (SI)		.216	.279	.442*	-.077	-.153	-.158	-.148
CATSO Incapacity to Change (IC)			.102	.142	-.492*	-.507**	-.766***	-.687***
CATSO Severity/Dangerous (SD)				.519**	-.150	-.350	-.143	-.238
CATSO Deviancy (DV)					-.223	-.131	-.041	-.150
SPA Individual Rights (IR)						.665***	.683***	.904***
SPA Political Compassion (PC)							.547**	.830***
SPA Wealth Distribution (WD)								.870***
SPA Total Score								

Note. Pearson correlation coefficients reported in the table. BJW = Belief in a Just World measure; CATSO = Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders measure; SPA = Survey of Political Attitudes measure. $N = 26$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Descriptive information about opinions of participants on sex offender registries

Opinions about SORs	Politicians		Community ^a	<i>t</i> -test (prob)	<i>Cohen's</i> <i>d</i>
	% said yes	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
1. Should SORs be available to the public	61.5% (16)	3.7 (1.35)	4.2 (1.06)	2.33 (.020)	0.42
2. Should SORs be available to law enforcement	96.2% (25)	4.8 (0.51)	4.7 (0.81)	0.62 (.533)	0.10
3. Do SORs protect the general public	38.5% (10)	3.2 (1.08)	3.7 (1.03)	2.42 (.016)	0.47
4. Do SORs help offenders live in the community	11.5% (3)	2.2 (1.05)	2.5 (1.07)	1.40 (.161)	0.28
5. Do SORs prevent commission of sex offences	7.7% (2)	2.3 (1.01)	2.6 (1.10)	1.37 (.172)	0.28
6. Do SORs prevent commission of non-sex offences	26.9% (7)	1.9 (0.91)	2.3 (1.07)	1.87 (.061)	0.40
7. Should sex offenders have residential restrictions	76.9% (20)	4.0 (1.08)	4.3 (0.96)	1.55 (.121)	0.29

Note. Means and standard deviations are provided for each opinion using a Likert scale ranging from definitely no (1) to definitely yes (5). Percentages (frequencies in parentheses) refer to participants who said probably or definitely yes is combined in the last column. *N* = 26. ^aData from study by Author Redacted (2018) with a community sample of 637 participants.

Table 3

Correlations between the attitudinal measures and perspectives and accuracy of SORs

Attitudinal measures	Opinions about SORs							1% accuracy
	1. Available to the public	2. Available to law enforcement	3. Protects general public	4. Helps offenders live in community	5. Prevents sex offences committed	6. Prevents non-sex offences committed	7. Residential restrictions	
BJW Total Score	.265	.274	.259	.481*	.237	.325	.417*	.175
CATSO								
Social Isolation	-.042	.084	-.177	.395*	-.049	.227	.074	-.019
Capacity to Change	.646***	.627***	.511**	.364	.161	.350	.661***	.488*
Severity/Dangerous	.156	.163	.204	.349	.387	.223	.374	.281
Deviancy	-.003	.189	.110	.344	.240	-.034	.313	.034
SPA Total Score	-.505**	-.558**	-.363	-.511**	-.054	-.375	-.654***	-.433*
Individual Rights	-.417*	-.583**	-.213	-.398*	.021	-.239	-.642***	-.349
Political Compassion	-.442*	-.430*	-.348	-.493*	-.111	-.412*	-.503**	-.541**
Wealth Distribution	-.592***	-.599***	-.417*	-.502**	.000	-.330	-.582**	-.267

Note. Spearman's correlations coefficients are reported for 7 opinions about SORs and Pearson's correlations are reported for percentage accuracy on 11 scenarios. BJW = Belief in a Just World measure; CATSO = Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders measure; SPA = Survey of Political Attitudes measure. $N = 26$. * $p < .01$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

¹Percentage correct for the sample was 72% ($SD = 17\%$).