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Sex Offender Myths in Print Media: Separating Fact from Fiction in U.S. Newspapers

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Abstract: *The media sometimes present certain myths related to sex offenders that run contrary to the data supported by empirical research, such as identifying sex offenders as being compulsive, homogenous, specialists, and incapable of benefiting from treatment. These myths affect the public's overall perception of sex offenders and their crimes, which, in turn, can influence public policy. The literature suggests that television news presents several myths about sex crimes and sex offenders; however, research on whether the print media perpetuate these myths is limited. This exploratory study seeks to begin filling this gap in the literature by examining the presentation of sex offender myths in newspaper articles. Employing content analysis, this study evaluated a sample of 334 articles published in 2009 in newspapers across the United States for the presence of sex offender myths. Sex offender myths were not significantly related to the type of article, region of publication, victim age or gender, or the type of offense. Myths were, however, significantly associated with articles reporting on various types of sex offender policies, often in a manner which runs contrary to empirical research. The legal and policy implications of these findings are explored.*

Keywords: criminal justice policy, crime and media, sex crimes, sex offenders

INTRODUCTION

Sexually-based crimes against children spark a sense of alarm and urgency among the public. This public response is exacerbated when the media sensationalizes cases involving the abduction and sexual victimization of children, especially those that tragically end in a child's murder (Katz-Schiavone et al. 2008). But such child abductions by strangers are rare. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (n.d.) estimates that roughly 115 children per year are the victims of kidnappings by strangers who hold the child overnight, transport the child 50 miles or more, kill the child, demand ransom, or intend to keep the child permanently (see also Sedlak et al. 2002). In contrast, young children are killed

by drunk drivers and as a result of "physical abuse or neglect perpetrated by their own parents or caretakers" at exponentially higher rates (Levenson and D'Amora, 2007: 179).

Media coverage of child sexual victimization fuels the public's morbid fascination with sex offenders who target children (Hanson et al. 2002; Levenson and D'Amora 2007; Lösel and Schmucker 2005; Miethe, Olson, and Mitchell 2006; Nieto and Jung 2006). Such media reports have led to a national moral panic surrounding the safety of children (Fox 2002; Jenkins 1998; Zgoba 2004) that has, in turn, perpetuated the acceptance of myths that run contrary to empirical knowledge about sex crimes and sex offenders (Center for Sex Offender Management 2000; Dowler 2006; Levenson et al. 2007; Zgoba 2004).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Social Construction of Sex Crimes and Offenders in the Media

The media play an important role in the way the public perceives the criminal justice system since the majority of public knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media (Dowler 2003; Surette 2011; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). But media are often ineffective in educating the public about crime. Indeed, coverage of violent and sensational crimes disproportionate to their levels in official data exaggerates public fears of victimization (Dowler 2006; Proctor, Badzinski, and Johnson 2002; Quinn, Forsyth, and Mullen-Quinn 2004; Surette 2011; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004), especially for sex crimes (see Soothill and Walby 1991).

The sensational method by which the media highlights crime, especially those of a sexual nature, has resulted in the creation of moral panics among the public (Maguire and Singer 2011; Soothill 2010; Zgoba 2004). Moral panic—a term first coined by Young in 1971 and largely attributed to Cohen (1972)—describes “a condition, episode, person, or group of persons which emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 1972:9). Thus, these threats create socially constructed parameters of acceptable or deviant behavior (Zgoba 2004). The depiction of sex crimes in the media appears to follow this general pattern (Maguire and Singer 2011). Rape, for example, tends to be over-reported while less serious sexual assaults are under-reported unless they are sensational or unusual in nature (Carringella-MacDonald 1998; Marsh 1991; Meyers 1997).

Dowler (2006) suggests that the selection of only atypical, sporadic incidents of rape and sexual assault produce several myths, which include: rape as sex; sexual assault as infrequent and isolated; and that rapes and sexual assaults are committed primarily by strangers. Even more telling is the media’s fascination with sex crimes committed against children. Palermo and Farkas (2001) posit that the outrage and fear that results from media reports of sex crimes against children sets the stage for widespread moral panic (see Blumer 1971). For example, a 2005 Gallup poll found that two-thirds of Americans polled were “very concerned” about the sexual molestation of children, out-rating their concern over violent crime or terrorism (Carroll 2005).

When a social problem is legitimated by the media, policy makers often respond with crime control strategies that address the socially constructed reality vis-à-vis the moral panic, rather than creating policies that are responsive to empirical data (Sample and Kadleck 2008). Griffin and Miller (2008:160) describe this process as *crime control theater*—“a public response or set of responses to crime which generate the appearance, but not

the fact, of crime control.” But, as Thomas (2010) pointed out, basing policy on high-profile cases is a flawed approach.

Rebuking Sex Offender Myths

Media present the public with “an increasingly distorted view of sex offending” which, in turn, molds public attitudes (Soothill 2010: 151). Through the process of crime control theater (Griffin and Miller 2008), these distortions lead to the adoption of policies that may be responsive to the moral panic of the public, but not necessarily to their actual safety needs (Cohen and Jeglic 2007; Craun, Kernsmith, and Butler 2011; Levenson and D’Amora 2007; Maguire and Singer 2011; Mancini et al. 2010; Sample and Bray 2006; Zgoba 2004). In the sections to follow, we explore several of the more prominent sex offender myths perpetuated by the media, as well as several of the crime control theater strategies that have been enacted in response to the moral panic caused by these myths.

Sexual compulsion. The notion of sexual compulsion suggests that sex offenders recidivate at an unusually high rate; yet, research suggests otherwise. Hanson and Bussière (1998) reported sexual recidivism rates between 10 to 15% after five years (as measured by rearrests). Other studies, however, have noted the importance of long-term, longitudinal research with sex offenders. Prentky and colleagues (1997), for example, reported that using a five-year window to look at recidivism misses 30% of the charges identified when a 25-year follow-up period is used. Still, when compared to other serious types of criminal behavior, sex offenders generally have lower recidivism rates and possess minimal criminal histories (Nieto and Jung 2006; Sample and Bray 2003). For example, Langan, Schmitt, and Durose (2003) examined the recidivism rates for sex offenders ($n=9,691$) across 15 states and found the three-year recidivism rate for those convicted of sex offenses was only 5.3%. This number stands in sharp contrast to the three-year recidivism rates for burglary, which was estimated at 74%; larceny, estimated at 75%; auto theft, estimated at 70%; or driving under the influence, estimated at 51% (Langan and Levin 2002; Nieto and Jung 2006; Sample and Bray 2003).

Specialization. Both in the news and in fictional portrayals of offenders on television, in books, and in movies, the media frequently represent criminals as specialists (Soothill, Fitzpatrick, and Francis 2009). But research suggests that, like most criminal offenders (Simon 1997), many sex offenders do not specialize in sex offenses generally or in a specific type of sex offense (e.g., Magers et al. 2009; Miethe et al. 2006). Of similar importance is the question of whether or not sexual offending continues throughout an offender’s criminal career. For example, does the fact that a sexual offense was committed as a juvenile predict whether or not sexual

offenses will be committed as an adult? Zimring and colleagues (2007, 2009) found that committing a sex offense as a juvenile did not predict adult sex offending. These results further discount the belief that sex offenders are specialists who persist in sex offending throughout their criminal careers (see also Caldwell 2007; Vandiver 2006).

Homogeneity. Sex offenders are not part of a homogenous group (Magers et al. 2009). Specifically, different types of sex offenders recidivate at very different rates (Langan et al. 2003; Miethe et al. 2006; Sample and Bray 2003). Offenders who commit sexual acts against adults recidivate at higher rates than child molesters do (Alexander 1999; Miethe et al. 2006; Quinsey, Khanna, and Malcom 1998). There are even significant differences within the group of offenders who victimize children. Hood and colleagues (2002) reported that 26.3% of extra-familial offenders were convicted of a new sex crime after six years as opposed to less than 1% of intra-familial offenders. Soothill and colleagues (2000) also found that those who had committed offenses against someone of the same sex were less likely to commit subsequent violent or property offenses than sex offenders whose original offense had been against someone of the opposite sex. Despite the heterogeneity of sex offenders, programs designed to control and treat this population—most notably offender registration and notification laws—are often based on the flawed assumption of homogeneity (Beauregard and Lieb 2011; Levenson et al. 2007; Sample and Bray 2006).

Capability of benefiting from treatment. The media commonly portray sex offenders as being incapable of benefitting from any form of rehabilitation (Witt and Zgoba 2005). Some studies support this conclusion since they found no significant differences in the recidivism rates of treated and untreated groups of sex offenders (Furby, Weinrott, and Blackshaw 1989; Hanson, Broom, and Stephenson 2004; Marques et al. 2005; Quinsey et al. 1993; Rice and Harris 2003). Most studies, however, demonstrate that two forms of treatment—chemical castration and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) that focuses on relapse prevention—are effective in reducing recidivism in sex offenders (Beech, Mandeville-Norden, and Goodwill 2012; Lösel and Schmucker 2005; Gordon and Grubin 2004; Hall 1995; Hanson et al. 2002, 2009; Schmucker and Lösel 2008; MacKenzie 2006).

Sex Offenders and Public Policy

Court-ordered cognitive behavioral therapies for sex offenders are underused (Levenson and D'Amora 2007; Meloy, Saleh, and Wolff 2007). In contrast, other forms of controlling sex offenders are widely used even though they are based, in large part, on popular misperceptions about sex offenders (Miethe et al. 2006). Many of these control policies merely “symbolically serve to pacify outrage by

‘doing something’ about brutal, heinous sex crimes” (Miethe et al. 2006:225; see also Sample, Evans, and Anderson 2011). Yet, most of these policies have been criticized for not only their lack of effectiveness (Agan 2011; Duwe and Donnay 2008; La Fond 2005; Meloy et al. 2007; Snyder 2000), but also for the ways in which they promote a false sense of security for communities (Agan 2011; La Fond 2005; Maguire and Singer 2011; Miethe et al. 2006; Sandler, Freeman, and Socia 2008).

Sex offender registry and notification laws. California was the first state to apply registration laws strictly to sex offenders in 1947 (La Fond 2005). Beginning in the early 1990s, registration laws became commonplace in the wake of the Jacob Wetterling and Megan Kanka cases. Generally speaking, these laws required convicted sex offenders to keep certain information up-to-date with their local police department, such as their current address, telephone number, Social Security number, and employment (Tewksbury and Lees 2006).

Some states went beyond the creation of sex offender registries by enacting notification laws designed to warn community members when sex offenders live nearby (Farkas and Stichman 2002). Notification laws are predicated on the assumption that community members will use this information to protect their children and report certain risky behaviors that could lead to sexual offending to their local police department (La Fond 2005). The notification approach was adopted nationally in 2006 when Congress passed The Adam Walsh Act—also known as the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA). That law made failing to register as a sex offender a federal felony offense. SORNA also created a baseline sex offender registry standard (McPherson 2007) and mandated that each state collect and track the names sex offenders, as well as a number of factors that can be used to identify and track them, including changes in residence and updated offense histories. When implementing SORNA, some states required offenders to provide local law enforcement with a recent photo of themselves, their fingerprints, and documentation of any treatment they may have received for mental disorders. And, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2010), all fifty states now require that convicted sex offenders provide a DNA sample to the state’s database.

Researchers question whether registration and notification laws have had any impact on sex offender recidivism (e.g., Schram and Milloy 1995). Vasquez, Maddan, and Walker (2008) examined the recidivism rate for convicted rapists across a number of states before and after those states implemented community notification laws. Six states included in their study (Arkansas, Connecticut, Nebraska, Nevada, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) experienced no significant change in the number of rapes reported monthly, three states (Hawaii, Idaho, and

Ohio) experienced significant decreases in rapes, and one state—California—experienced a significant *increase* in rapes following the introduction of registration and notification laws. The researchers interpreted these results as not offering “a clear or unidirectional conclusion as to whether sex offender notification laws reduce rapes” (2008:187).

Several other studies have also concluded that notification laws are ineffective in reducing sex offense recidivism (Agan 2011; Duwe and Donnay 2008; Prescott and Rockoff 2011; Sandler et al. 2008; Tewksbury and Jennings 2010; Veysey and Zgoba 2010; Zgoba et al. 2008). In fact, in their analysis of National Incidence Based Reporting System data in 15 different states, Prescott and Rockoff (2011) found some evidence that although notification laws may deter first-time sex offenders, they actually *increase* recidivism rates among registered sex offenders (see also Drake and Aos 2009; Letourneau et al. 2010).

Meloy, Saleh, and Wolff (2007) posited that notification laws are ineffective because sex offender registries are not comprehensive lists of sex offenders, but rather are incomplete due to a number of factors. Specifically, most sex crimes are not reported; plea bargaining allows the offender to negotiate a way out of registering; many mandated offenders do not comply with registration requirements; and most importantly, registration laws often focus on victimizations by strangers—the rarest form of sexual violence. In fact, children are much more likely to be abused by a family member or acquaintance (Simon 2000; Vanzile-Tamsen, Testa, and Livingston 2005). Consequently, notification laws may provide a false sense of security (Davey 2009; La Fond 2005; Miethel et al. 2006; Sandler et al. 2008) by misleading people into believing that children are more often victimized by strangers rather than someone they know (see also Craun and Theriot 2009). In addition, registries contain inaccurate entries due to changes in addresses and data entry mistakes, omissions, and deletions (Salmon 2010).

Others have added that notification laws do not decrease recidivism because they lack the important aspect of treatment that is necessary to control sex offenders effectively (Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Indeed, treatment is a forgotten consideration under such laws. But it is not just the law which has neglected the role that treatment can play if tied to notification laws; research has similarly neglected this link. Elbogen, Patry, and Scalora (2003) reported that sex offenders perceived notification laws as motivation to complete their treatment program and refrain from reoffending. But since the study did not provide any follow-up data, the impact of offender notification on treatment remains unclear.

Finally, it should be noted that notification laws have had some unforeseen consequences. Community notification can cause a decline in home values for

households near those of registered sex offenders (Linden and Rockoff 2008; Pope 2008). They have caused police to incur substantial labor and capital costs to implement community notification programs (Zgoba et al. 2008). Similarly, probation and parole agencies have had to invest significantly more time to assist offenders subject to notification in securing housing and jobs (Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Community notification can take a significant toll on an offender’s family members economically, socially, psychologically, and even physically (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). And, finally, notification can cause high rates of socially destabilizing consequences for the offenders themselves, ranging from stress, shame, harassment, job loss, loss of friends, and, in rare cases, even community vigilantism against sex offenders (Ackerman and Sacks 2012; Lasher and McGrath 2012). Notably, all of these consequences can be counterproductive insofar as they can lead to reoffending (see Freeman and Sandler 2010; Hanson et al. 2009).

Global positioning system (GPS) monitoring. First introduced in 1984 in New Mexico, electronic monitoring of sex offenders with GPS technology is emerging as a common tool used to monitor offenders in the community (Levenson and D’Amora 2007). Offenders are required to wear a transmitter that allows their movements and whereabouts to be monitored. Passive GPS sends a report at intervals, which are determined by a supervising officer; active GPS provides continuous real-time surveillance (Levenson and D’Amora 2007). The premise behind GPS monitoring is that the offender is less likely to engage in impulsive behavior while being monitored and is, therefore, deterred from engaging in criminal activities (Levenson and D’Amora 2007).

Although GPS technology may assist in the overall supervision, management, and control of sex offenders (Delson 2006), it cannot directly prevent sexual crimes from occurring since GPS only provides notice of offenders who stray from approved locations, but does not prevent deviant activity that occurs within approved geographic locations (Levenson and D’Amora 2007). Consider the case involving Phillip Garrido. Despite the fact that he was not only required to register as a sex offender, but also to wear a GPS tracking device after his parole from kidnapping and rape charges, he was nonetheless able to hold Jaycee Dugard captive and abuse her for 18 years (Davey 2009).

Although the introduction of GPS monitoring has become an innovative way to control offenders, it is not without criticism. The constitutionality of GPS has been questioned with regard to search and seizure, self-incrimination, and the violation of due process rights (Delson 2006). Further, fiscal impacts exist for offenders who are required to fund the technology. More importantly, however, the reliability of GPS has been questioned. Some have argued that there is little evidence showing that GPS monitoring is more effective than other

sanctions at reducing recidivism (e.g., Levenson and D'Amora 2007; Turner et al. 2007). For instance, in a study comparing sex offender parolees who were being monitored using GPS technology with a comparison group of sex offender parolees, the Tennessee Board of Probation and Parole (2007) found no significant differences in the number of parole violations or new criminal charges between the two groups. A similar evaluation of San Diego's GPS pilot program for high-risk sex offenders also determined that GPS monitoring had little, if any, effect on parolee recidivism (Turner et al. 2007). And, as with notification laws, GPS monitoring of sex offenders has also produced an unintended consequence. Armstrong and Freeman (2011) report that "a significant portion of a probation officer's time, and consequently the jurisdiction's GPS monitoring program staffing resources, are spent responding to alerts produced by the limitations of underdeveloped technology" rather than "responding to violations of criminal behaviors, or precursory behaviors associated with an offending cycle" (2011:180).

Residence restrictions. Residence restrictions "are among the newest and most popular forms of sex offender laws" (Meloy, Miller, and Curtis 2008:209). First enacted by Delaware and Florida in 1995, residence restrictions were designed to limit where sex offenders can reside and in some cases, also place restrictions on where these offenders can "work, walk, or be physically present" (2008:210). These restrictions vary in specificity from state-to-state; however, they generally prohibit sex offenders from living within a certain number of feet from various locations including schools, parks, playgrounds and other places where children are likely to congregate (Nieto and Jung 2006). For example, the state of California enacted residence restrictions in 2006 for offenders who have committed certain sex crimes from residing within 2,000 feet of schools or parks (Meloy, Miller, and Curtis 2008).

Proponents of residence restrictions argue that these restrictions are necessary to limit where sex offenders can live or venture because it limits their access to children, thereby reducing their ability to reoffend (Center for Sex Offender Management 2007). But research has demonstrated that residential proximity to schools, parks, and other restricted areas where children are presumably found is not associated with sexual recidivism (Barnes et al 2008; Duwe, Donnay, and Tewksbury 2008; Zandbergen, Levenson, and Hart 2010). Thus, not only do opponents assert that these restrictions are unlikely to reduce sexual violence, but also, they may have the opposite effect by increasing sexual victimization (Davey 2006, 2009; Loney 2008; Meloy, Miller, and Curtis 2008; Nieto and Jung 2006; Tregilgas 2010). Consider that, as with notification laws, residential restrictions perpetuate the stranger-danger myth that the majority of sex crimes are committed by individuals not known to the victim when research demonstrates otherwise (Levenson and D'Amora 2007;

Meloy, Miller, and Curtis 2008; Snyder 2000).

The empirical research on residence restrictions suggests that this approach to dealing with sex offenders does not reduce recidivism. In 2007, the Minnesota Department of Corrections published the results of a study that followed the behavioral patterns of 224 recidivists who were released from prison between 1990 and 2002 and had been reincarcerated by 2006. Among the results of the study, it was found that "not one of the 224 sex offenses would likely have been deterred by a residency restrictions law" (2007: 2). The study also found that residence proximity (i.e., distance from a school or park) did not matter when it came to sexual recidivism, but "social or relationship proximity" would (2007: 2). Researchers in California found similar results (Nieto and Jung 2006).

As with community notification laws, restrictions on where sex offenders may live have produced some unintended consequences. First, these laws disproportionately burden people living in densely populated areas (Berenson and Appelbaum 2011; Socia 2011). Thus, if offenders abided by the restrictions, they would have to relocate to less densely-populated or rural areas where they are likely to find "less access to treatment facilities, fewer public transportation options, and fewer employment opportunities" all of which could actually increase recidivism (Socia 2011:379).

Second, residential restrictions assume that offenders can live in an area away from prohibited locations, but that is not necessarily the case. Finding available and affordable housing can prove to be a near impossible task in some areas. Consider that Berenson and Appelbaum's (2011) parcel geocoding study found that residential restrictions in two New York counties dramatically reduced available residential locations in non-urban areas by 89.46% and 73.16% in the two counties and almost eliminated them completely in the urban areas by restricting 95.45% and 97.21% of residential locations of the two counties. Given the lack of available and affordable alternatives, Berenson and Appelbaum found that more than 85% of offenders living in the urban areas they studied simply did not abide by the residential restrictions. Those offenders who do not want to risk reincarceration have only two real options. They can move into the few, concentrated geographic locations in which they may live legally; however, such living arrangements might prevent their successful reintegration into society, increase fear in those neighborhoods, and reduce housing values. Alternatively, they may be forced to live on the streets. California, for example, reported that over 6,000 sex offenders were transient in 2011—an increase of approximately 101% from 2007—a point about one year after the state's residence restrictions were put into place (California Sex Offender Management Board 2011). The stress of being homeless and the inability of probation and parole officers to monitor the homeless can,

in turn, increase sex offender recidivism.

Summary and Purpose of the Present Study

Research has cast doubt on the efficacy of each of the major policies designed to increase the social control of sex offenders. A strong argument can be made that media-fueled moral panics led to the adoption of laws and policies that may be popular with the public even though their efficacy is circumspect, if not downright dubious. But it is not just that research suggests that sex offender registry and notification programs, GPS monitoring schemes, and residential restrictions are all ineffective, rather, there is ample evidence that these policies have high monetary and human costs. Worse yet, by perpetuating myths which may create a false sense of safety, and by diverting resources away from treatment and reentry programs, bad public policies may actually be making society less safe. So why don't we demand better policies? Dowler (2006) suggested the answer to this question lies with the fact that public is misled by the television media to believe a socially constructed reality based on myths that underpin the creation of bad criminal justice policies. We seek to build on Dowler's research by exploring whether print media might also be complicit in perpetuating "crime control theater."

Specifically, this study was conducted to determine if sex offender myths are present in print media in ways that parallel their presentation in television news as identified by Dowler (2006). Dowler found that, when compared to other violent crimes, stories about sex crimes were more likely to be presented in a context of fear and to focus more on the latter phases of the criminal justice process. Although these differences help us to better understand the presentation of sex crimes in television news, they do not address the commonly held depictions or myths of sex offenders. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on three related research questions. First, we seek to determine if commonly held myths about sex offenders are presented in print media and, if so, with what frequency. Second, if such myths appear in print media, this research seeks to explore the contexts in which the four most common myths (compulsive, specialist, homogenous, and incapable of being treated) are presented. Finally, if sex offender myths are present in print media, this study seeks to determine what variables, if any, are significantly associated with the presentation of these myths.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed quantitative content analysis to uncover the presence of sex offender myths in print media. Content analysis is used to locate the presence of certain words, concepts, or themes within a form of communication (see Neuendorf 2002), in this case

newspapers. This is accomplished by obtaining data using predefined categories which are used to measure the frequency and eventually extent to which these variables and/or categories are related (Babbie 2007). Quantitative content analysis was appropriate for the purposes of this research because certain predefined sex offender myths were central to the hypotheses set forth by the researchers (Neuendorf 2002). This method was also appropriate because it allowed the researchers to identify, track, and analyze specific manifest content in newspaper articles, which naturally form the unit of analysis for this study.

Sample

This study examined a systematic random sample of newsprint media published throughout the United States during the year 2009. Factiva, a news database operated by Dow Jones, provided the sampling frame because it offers full-text access to a broad cross-section of major newspapers, specialized periodicals, and newswires. Rather than relying on keyword or headline searches, we ran the following Boolean search in Factiva's "Major News and Business Publications: US" database¹: SEX* AND (CRIM* AND OFFEND*), thereby increasing the representativeness of the sample. This process yielded a total of 667 articles. Because systematic random sampling for content analysis is appropriate to insure the validity of statistics inference (Neuendorf 2002), using a random start, every-other article was reviewed and coded, yielding a total of 334 articles—a more than sufficient amount to effectively represent content from an entire year (see Riffe, Aust, and Lacy 1993; Stemple 1952).²

Data Coding and Analysis

The content analysis was conducted in three phases. First, each of the 334 articles was examined for the presence of one or more of the 19 variables under examination. The variables were placed into five categories which included: 1) newspaper variables; 2) victim variables; 3) offense variables; 4) the presence or absence of sex offender myths; and 5) the presence or absence of sex offender policies. These categories and variables are described in more detail in Table 1.

The second phase involved examining the degree to which the articles focused on the relevant subject matter. Articles were coded into one of three categories: "key," "passing," or "duplicative/irrelevant." Articles coded as "key" contained substantive material related to sex offenders, a sex crime, or a sex offender policy. Articles coded as "passing" merely mentioned sex offenders, a sex crime, or a sex policy as part of a news story that focused on something else. And, of 334 cases examined in this study, 121 (36.2%) were excluded either because they were duplicates (largely a function of wire service articles being run in different newspapers), or because the article

Table 1. Description and Coding of Variables from News Stories in Research Sample Gathered From Factiva

Variable		Description and Coding
Newspaper Variables	Article Type	Article was: a news story = 0; an editorial = 1; or other =2
	Geographic Origin	Region of publication was: northeast = 0; south = 1; mid-west = 2; west = 3
	Article Relevance	Discussion of sex offenders, sex offender policies, or sex crimes was: key to the article =1; mentioned in passing = 2; not relevant = 3
Victim Variables	Victim Age	The article: did not identify the age of the victim = 0; identified the victim as a child =1; identified the victim as an adult =2; identified both child and adult victims = 3
	Victim Gender	The article: did not identify the gender of the victim = 0; identified the victim as a male = 1; identified the victim as a female = 2; identified victims of both genders = 3
Offense Variables	Assault	The article identified the crime as a sexual assault not amounting to a rape: no = 0; yes = 1
	Rape	The article identified the crime as a rape: no = 0; yes = 1.
	Possession of Child Pornography	The article identified the crime as possession of child pornography: no = 0; yes = 1
	Lewd and Lascivious Conduct	The article identified the crime as lewd and lascivious conduct: no = 0; yes = 1
	Child Molestation	The article identified the crime as child molestation: no = 0; yes = 1
Policy Variables	Effectiveness of Policy	The article discussed the effectiveness of a sex offender policy: no = 0; yes = 1
	Sex Offender Registration and/or Notification	The article discussed sex offender registration and/or community notification: no = 0; yes = 1
	Residence Restrictions	The article discussed sex offender residence restrictions: no = 0; yes = 1
	GPS/Electronic Monitoring	The article discussed the use of GPS/electronic monitoring relative to sex offenders: no = 0; yes = 1
	Cost Concerns	The article discussed cost concerns relative to sex offender policies: no = 0; yes = 1
Sex Offender Myth Variables	Compulsive	The article presented sex offenders as being compulsive individuals: no = 0; yes = 1
	Homogenous	The article presented sex offenders as belonging to a homogenous group of offenders: no = 0; yes = 1
	Specialist	The article presented sex offenders as committing strictly sex crimes: no = 0; yes = 1
	Incapable of Being Treated	The article presented sex offenders as being incapable of being treated: no = 0; yes = 1

was not about sex offenders, a sex crime, or a sex offender policy (e.g., announcements of lectures at local colleges, the publication of book, etc.). Thus, a total of 213 relevant newspaper articles were analyzed.

In the third and final phase, a second researcher independently reviewed and coded a random sample of 35 (10.4%) of articles from the 334 originally identified in the research sample. All but 2 of the 35 articles were coded identically by the two researchers, yielding an impressively high level of 94.3% inter-rater reliability.³

RESULTS

Frequency of Newspaper, Victim, and Offense Variables

Table 2 provides the characteristics of the sample. Of the articles examined in this study, the majority were news stories ($n=135$; 63.4%). Interestingly, 42.8% ($n=143$) of the articles discussed sex offenders, sex crimes, or sex

Table 2. Sample Characteristics from News Stories in Research Sample Gathered From Factiva (n=213)

Variable		Coding/Classification	N	Percent
Newspaper Variables	Article Type	News Story	135	63.4%
		Editorial	39	18.3%
		Other	39	18.3%
		Total	213	100%
	Geographic Origin	Northeast	77	36.2%
		South	70	32.9%
		Midwest	15	7.0%
		West	35	16.4%
		National Wireservice	16	7.5%
	Article Relevance	Key	70	21.0%
		Passing	143	42.8%
		Irrelevant	121	36.2%
Victim Variables	Victim Age	Not Reported	102	47.9%
		Child Victim	64	30%
		Adult Victim	36	16.9%
		Both Child and Adult Victims	11	5.2%
	Victim Gender	Not Reported	109	51.2%
		Female	79	4.7%
		Male	10	37.1%
		Both Male and Female	15	7.0%
Offense Variables	Assault	Yes	63	29.6%
		No	150	70.4%
	Rape	Yes	62	29.1%
		No	151	70.9%
	Possession of Child Pornography	Yes	18	8.5%
		No	195	91.5%
	Lewd and Lascivious Conduct	Yes	28	13.1%
		No	185	86.9%
	Child Molestation	Yes	26	12.2%
		No	187	87.8%
Use of a Weapon	Yes	9	4.2%	
	No	204	95.8%	

policy “in passing,” rather than presenting one or more of these topics as the central focus of the article. Further, a plurality of the newspaper articles in the sample did not identify victim gender ($n=109$; 51.2%) or age ($n=102$; 47.9%). Similarly, most of the offense variables that were examined were rarely present in the articles. Specifically, 29.6% ($n=63$) discussed assault; 29.1% ($n = 62$) mentioned rape; 13.1% ($n = 28$) referenced lewd conduct; 12.2% ($n=26$) concerned child molestation; and 8.5% ($n = 18$) referred to child pornography.

Policy Variables

Table 3 summarizes the type of policy and myth variables present in the sample. Only 15.5% ($n=33$) of the articles in the sample discussed the effectiveness of any sex offender policy. Sex offender registration/community

notification was the policy discussed most frequently ($n=96$, 45.1%), followed by residence restrictions with 13.1% ($n=28$), GPS/electronic monitoring ($n=25$, 11.7%), and finally cost concerns with 6.6% ($n=14$).⁴

Myth Variables

In the 80 (37.6%) articles that presented at least one sex offender myth, 23 (10.8%) presented sex offenders as being compulsive individuals; 67 (31.5%) presented sex offenders as belonging to a homogenous group; 12 (5.6%) presented sex offenders as specializing in strictly sex crimes; and only 5 (2.3%) presented sex offenders as being incapable of benefiting from treatment. Consequently, the answer to the first research question is a qualified yes; myths regarding sex offenders are reported in print media, but only in about one-third of the articles.

Table 3. Policy and Myth Variables from News Stories in Research Sample Gathered From Factiva (n=213)

	Variable	Coding/Classification	N	Percent
Policy Variables	Effectiveness of Policy	Discussed	33	15.5%
		Not Discussed	180	84.5%
	Sex Offender Registration and/or Notification	Discussed	96	45.1%
		Not Discussed	117	54.9%
	Residence Restrictions	Discussed	28	13.1%
		Not Discussed	185	86.9%
	GPS/Electronic Monitoring	Discussed	25	11.7%
		Not Discussed	188	88.3%
Cost Concerns	Discussed	14	6.6%	
	Not Discussed	199	93.4%	
Myth Variables	Compulsive	Myth Present	23	10.8%
		Myth Not Present	190	89.2%
	Specialist	Myth Present	12	5.6%
		Myth Not Present	201	94.4%
	Homogenous	Myth Present	67	31.5%
		Myth Not Present	146	68.5%
	Incapable of Being Treated	Myth Present	5	2.3%
		Myth Not Present	208	97.7%

The second research question concerns the contexts in which the compulsive, specialist, homogenous, and incapable of being treated myths are presented. The following analyses address this question by explaining the most frequent ways in which the myths were presented.

Compulsive. Of the 23 articles that presented sex offenders as being compulsive, 19 (82.6%) of them pertained to sex crimes involving children or safeguards to prevent crimes against children. Key words, statements, and phrases, such as: *compulsion; compulsive; re-offend; likely to commit another offense; will commit future crimes; resume a life of crime; likely to repeat their crimes; protect from the threat of recidivism* appeared in newspaper articles that were coded for the presence of the compulsive myth. A few of the articles, however, appeared to suggest offenders are not compulsive individuals. This was true in articles that discussed possession of child pornography as a gateway to molesting children. U.S. District Judge Robin J. Cauthron is quoted in an article as saying:

It is too often the case that a defendant appears to be a social misfit looking at dirty pictures in the privacy of his own home without any real prospect of touching or otherwise acting out as to any person. As foul as child pornography is, I am unpersuaded by the suggestion that a direct link has been proven between viewing child porn and molesting children (as quoted in Cardona 2009:A1).

Homogenous. Of the 67 articles that presented sex offenders as part of a homogenous group, 42 (62.7%) discussed sex offender policy. Unlike the compulsive myth where keywords, phrases, or statements played a role in distinguishing the presence of the myth, the homogenous myth was located in a different way. Newspaper articles that discussed sex offenders, sex offender policy, or sex crimes without distinguishing between types of sex crimes (i.e., molestation, possession of child pornography, rape) were coded as homogenous. For example, in an article titled “Sex offenders more difficult to monitor; Increased arrests, lack of manpower, electronics cited” (Markon 2009), sex offenders were discussed as a homogenous group of offenders. The article failed to distinguish between what types of sex crimes would be cause for an offender being subject to electronic monitoring or other types of control methods. Other articles that were coded as presenting sex offenders as belonging to a homogenous group continually referred to particular offenders as “a sex offender,” without disseminating their commitment offense.

Specialist. Of the 12 articles that presented sex offenders as specialists, half did so in the context of describing lewd and lascivious conduct. Articles were defined as presenting sex offenders as specialists if they focused on one specific type of sex crime (i.e. child pornography), or on sex crimes in general. For example, in an article titled “Dark image of offenders emerges; Porn collectors can’t be stereotyped, but many also sexually

exploit children,” Scott (2009) presents the image of a particular, unidentified offender as having only committed the offense of collecting and possessing child pornography. By focusing on this one type of offense without making it clear to the reader that the offender has 1) no prior offenses for other types of crimes, or 2) has committed other types of crimes, the reader is led to believe that sex offenders are specialists; that is—offenders only commit crimes of a sexual nature.

Incapable of benefiting from treatment. Of the five articles that identified sex offenders as being incapable of benefiting from treatment, most focused on offenders who have been convicted of multiple sex crimes. It was apparent that when legislation regarding sex offenders was involved, lawmakers were more hesitant about providing a treatment alternative. For example, Representative Jack Franks of Woodstock, Illinois was quoted in an article as saying: “If you look at the recidivism rate of sex offenders, it’s over 50 percent. These people can’t be cured” (McDermott 2009:C1).

Table 4. Associations between Independent Variables and Sex Offender Myths from News Stories in Research Sample Gathered From Factiva (n=213)

Variable		Category	Myth Present	Chi-Square _(df)	Phi
Newspaper Variables	Article Type	News Story	48 of 135 (35.6%)	1.505 ₍₂₎	.084
		Editorial	14 of 39 (35.9%)		
		Other	18 of 39 (46.2%)		
	Geographic Origin	Northeast	33 of 77 (42.9%)	9.035 ₍₃₎	.214
		South	21 of 70(30.0%)		
		Midwest	9 of 15(60.0%)		
West		8 of 35(22.9%)			
Victim Variables	Victim Age	Not Reported	43 of 102 (42.2%)	4.599 ₍₃₎	.147
		Child Victim	25 of 64 (39.1%)		
		Adult Victim	8 of 36 (22.2%)		
		Both	4 of 11 (36.4%)		
	Victim Gender	Not Reported	47 of 109 (43.1%)	5.312 ₍₃₎	.158
		Female	22 of 79 (27.8%)		
		Male	5 of 10 (50.0%)		
		Both	6 of 15 (40.0%)		
Offense Variables	Assault	Discussed	16 of 63 (25.4%)	5.642 ₍₁₎	-.163
	Rape	Discussed	18 of 62 (29.0%)	2.711 ₍₁₎	-.113
	Possession of Child Pornography	Discussed	8 of 18 (44.4%)	.398 ₍₁₎	.43
	Lewd and Lascivious Conduct	Discussed	9 of 28 (32.1%)	.403 ₍₁₎	-.44
	Child Molestation	Discussed	8 of 26 (30.8%)	.582 ₍₁₎	-.52
	Use of Weapon	Discussed	1 of 9 (11.1%)	2.803 ₍₁₎	-.115
Policy Variables	Effectiveness of Policy	Discussed	21 of 33 (63.6%)	11.323 ₍₁₎ *	.231
	Registration/Community Notification	Discussed	49 of 96 (51.0%)	13.547 ₍₁₎ *	.252
	Residence Restrictions	Discussed	25 of 28 (89.3%)	36.781 ₍₁₎ *	.416
	GPS/Electronic Monitoring	Discussed	16 of 25 (64.0%)	8.444 ₍₁₎ *	.199
	Cost Concerns	Discussed	8 of 14 (57.1%)	2.451 ₍₁₎	.107

Variables Associated with Sex Offender Myths

Bivariate analyses were required to examine the third research question which focuses on the variables that are associated with the presentation of the myths. Pearson’s chi-square analyses were used to examine associations between the independent variables (newspaper, victim, offense and policy variables) and an overall measure of sex offender myths. This dependent variable combined each

of the four sex offender myths examined in this study (i.e., compulsive, specialist, homogenous, incapable of being treated) into a single sex offender myth variable where presence was coded as 1 and absence was coded as 0. Combining the four myths yielded a total of 80 for articles that identified one or more sex offender myths. Chi-square analyses are appropriate because they allow for determining the significance of the relationship between

two categorical variables (Bachman and Paternoster 2004). Additionally, a Phi coefficient was used to examine the strength of the relationship between variables that were statistically significant. A Phi coefficient was used because it is “appropriate when we have nominal-level variables and a 2 X 2 table” (Bachman and Paternoster 2004: 345).

Table 4 presents the results of the chi-square analyses. None of the independent variables were significantly associated with sex offender myths except for those dealing with public policy. Specifically, of the 33 articles reporting on the alleged effectiveness of sex offender policies, 21 (63.6%) contained at least one of type of sex offender myth ($\chi^2_{(1)}=11.323$; $p < .01$); of the 96 articles discussing sex offender registration and/or community notification laws, 49 (51.0%) presented a sex offender myth ($\chi^2_{(1)}=13.574$; $p < .01$); of the 28 articles that addressed sex offender residence restrictions, 25 (89.3%) contained at least one myth about sex offenders ($\chi^2_{(1)}=36.781$; $p < .01$); and 16 (64.0%) of the 25 articles reporting on electronic monitoring of sex offenders contained a sex offender myth ($\chi^2_{(1)}=8.444$; $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

One or more of the four popular myths regarding sex offenders (i.e., recidivism, specialization, homogeneity, and susceptibility to treatment) appeared in 38% ($n = 80$) of the newspaper articles in the sample. The existence of myths, as already discussed, may be present in print media due to responses to certain highly sensationalized sex crime stories (Levenson and D’Amora 2007; Meloy et al. 2007). For example, over a quarter (26%, $n=21$) of the 80 articles that presented myths were news stories involving the discovery of Jaycee Dugard who was held captive for over 18 years by Phillip Garrido, a convicted sex offender. Some articles referred to Garrido as a sex offender without identifying his original commitment or sex crime (rape). This suggests that the media are portraying him as belonging to a homogenous group of offenders, while articles that did mention Garrido’s rape conviction portray him as being a specialist. That is, by failing to mention other nonsexual crimes for which he had been convicted, such as kidnapping, the public is led to believe that he commits only crimes of a sexual nature. Additionally, the frequency with which the Garrido case was reported illustrates how the media over-report a single, high-profile crime. In doing so, media socially construct a distorted reality on the prevalence of sexual kidnappings which contributes to moral panics about sex offenders in much the same way that Sample (2006) found the media similarly distorts the prevalence of sexual homicides.

Many of the newspaper articles that presented sex offender myths did so within the context of sex offender policy ($n=51$; 64%). This is a noteworthy finding. As previously discussed, research has documented that many

sex offender policies themselves are based on false assumptions regarding the nature of sex offenders (Levenson, et al. 2007; Sample and Bray 2003, 2006). With this in mind, our finding that sex offender myths are most commonly reported in newspaper articles addressing sex offender control policies strongly suggests that the print media may be perpetuating incorrect beliefs about sex offenders. This, thereby, contributes to the support for ineffective control policies that are not supported by empirical findings. Indeed, this finding lends additional support to the results reported by Sample and Kadleck (2008) that public officials’ personal perceptions concerning sex offenders were significantly shaped by the media and influenced both the passage and content of legislation.

Policies that were examined in this paper included: sex offender registration/notification, residence restrictions, and GPS/electronic monitoring. Results revealed a strong association between effectiveness of policy and sex offender myths. That is, when an article discussed the effectiveness of a sex offender policy, sex offender myths were also present. After reviewing each of the articles that presented sex offender myths, it was determined that many articles were policy-based. These articles either discussed the effectiveness of a certain sex offender policy, like sex offender registration/notification, or discussed the ineffectiveness of a particular policy.

This was particularly apparent in articles that presented sex offenders as being compulsive and also those that presented sex offenders as being incapable of benefiting from treatment. Many of the articles that identified sex offenders as being compulsive discussed sex offender residence restrictions. For example, sex offender policy expert Jill Levenson is quoted as saying:

The risk that sex offenders might pose in shelters for women and children may make sense, but to ban them from any shelter would have to be balanced with the need to provide social services to sex offenders. If someone is homeless, despondent, and desperate, they’re more likely to resume a life of crime (as quoted in Abel, 2009:B1).

This article presented the debate on whether to ban sex offenders from seeking housing in homeless shelters. Proponents of extending sex offender residence restrictions to homeless shelters assume that these offenders will likely commit another offense against women and children in the same shelters. Opponents of this policy, like Jill Levenson, argue that banning these offenders from homeless shelters will pose a greater threat to society because it makes it more difficult for these offenders to meet their basic human needs. Such bans force sex offenders to live on the streets, a consequence which not only makes it difficult for law enforcement to keep track of sex offenders, but also increases strain on the offender

such that they are more likely to recidivate (Ackerman and Sacks 2012; Agnew 2001, 2006). Thus, such a policy may be counterproductive to the goal of effectively controlling sex offenders.

Similarly, policy was a strong theme in articles that presented sex offenders as being incapable of benefiting from treatment. Articles such as, "Illinois lawmakers seek more restrictions on sex offenders," discussed lawmakers' movement to pass more stringent laws against sex offenders because of the "special nature of sex crimes" (McDermott 2009:C1). Because of this belief, some lawmakers such as Representative Franks of Woodstock, Illinois, argue that "these people can't be cured" (2009:C1).

In order to understand why there was such a strong association found between effectiveness of policy and sex offender myths, each sex offender policy (registration/community notification, residence restrictions, and GPS/electronic monitoring) was examined separately to see if the policy was associated with particular sex offender myths. A strong association was found between sex offender registration and/or community notification laws and sex offender myths. That is, when an article discussed sex offender registration/notification, sex offender myths were also present in the article. The literature suggests that sex offender notification/registration laws were borne out of highly sensationalized incidents (Meloy et al. 2007; Sandler et al. 2008). For example, the abduction of Jacob Wetterling in 1989 led Congress to enact the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act (1994), which mandated all states adopt sex offender registration laws requiring offenders convicted of certain sexual acts to register their names and addresses with their local police department. Similarly, the rape-murder of Megan Kanka expanded sex offender registration to include community notification provisions. The logic of sex offender registration/notification laws assumes that if the public is notified of the presence of a sex offender in their community, they will be able to protect themselves and children from such perpetrators. Arguably, the underlying premise of this assumption is that sex offenders are compulsive individuals who are likely to commit another sex crime.

A strong association was also found between sex offender residence restrictions and myths. When a newspaper article in the research sample mentioned and/or discussed sex offender residence restrictions, sex offender myths were also present. Residence restrictions were enacted in order to protect children from being exposed to registered sex offenders near schools, playgrounds, parks, or other areas where children normally frequent. (La Fond 2005; Meloy et al. 2008). Again, residence restrictions may be based on the belief that that sex offenders are compulsive individuals. The assumption here is that if a sex offender is near where children congregate, he or she

lacks self-control to prevent victimizing another child.

The fourth analysis also found a strong association between GPS/electronic monitoring and sex offender myths. Again, when a newspaper article discussed/mentioned GPS/electronic monitoring of sex offenders, sex offender myths were also present in the article. Like residence restrictions, GPS/electronic monitoring were meant as control mechanisms or a means by which law enforcement officials would be able to track the whereabouts of sex offenders throughout the day, particularly if they entered restricted areas (such as a park or school campus). Here again, the assumption is that if law enforcement is able to control and track the whereabouts of registered sex offenders within the community, they may be able to prevent future victimization.

Taken as a whole, the results of this study suggest that sex offender myths are more likely to be present in articles discussing policy than in articles that do not discuss policy. Of the 80 newspaper articles that presented sex offender myths, 51 (64%) discussed one or more sex offender policies. Yet, these myths were not presented in high frequencies since only 38% of the articles in the sample presented one or more sex offender myths.

Study Limitations

Several limitations to this study should be noted. Because this study employed content analysis that is dependent, in part, upon interpretations of the data by the researcher, the possibility that others would have interpreted the data differently must be acknowledged. For example, while manifest content involves more apparent content (e.g., whether an article was a news story or an editorial; the region of the country in which an article was published), latent content required the researcher to examine the overall tone and placement of content in each newspaper article to determine the presence or absence of certain variables, like the myths or policies examined in this study. An inter-rater reliability level of 94.3%, however, helps minimize this concern.

Second, the conclusions in this study were drawn based on analyses of a random sample of articles which appeared in U.S. newspapers during a one-year period of time. Analyses performed on data drawn from a longer time-frame could potentially produce nuances that were not evident when examining only a single year of data. Future research on a larger sample of articles from a longer time period might yield a richer data set upon which more generalizable analyses could be conducted.

Third, as with all research which analyzes media content, the present research is limited by the filtering process of newspaper editing and publishing. News stories go through a number of steps from the time an event takes place until their dissemination to the public, including being put into a news pool from which editors or producers

select the most “newsworthy” stories to be published or presented (see Surette 2011). This organizational process of transforming events into news results in subjective, stylized information that limits liability issues. Thus, it is possible that the study’s results could be skewed due to either the over-selection or under-selection of sex offender news articles. However, because our goal was to analyze how media selection and reporting of stories contributes to the social construction of sex offenses and offenders—even if through over-reporting of high profile cases like that of Jaycee Dugard—this concern should be minimal.

Fourth, the data analyzed in this study were limited by the fact that data could be coded only as nominal-level variables. The level of measurement only allowed for the reporting of percentages, Pearson’s chi-square analyses, and Phi coefficients.

Fifth, because this study employed traditional content analysis, the variables that were examined in this study were predefined based on the existing literature. This method did not allow for the introduction of other new variables, such as additional sex offender myths or policies for the control of sex offenders beyond the ones identified in Table 1. Employing qualitative content analysis could have created a more rich and involved data set (see Altheide 1996). Future research triangulating both traditional and qualitative content analysis might yield an ever richer understanding of the ways in which media report on sex offenders, sex crimes, and policies designed to control sex offenders.

Finally, the researchers did not code for several variables that are sometimes included in content analyses of print media, such as article length or the source(s) of information identified in an article (i.e., official, victim, offender, general public, and/or politician). Those conducting future research on the depiction of sex offenders in print media might consider including these variables.

Conclusion

Understanding the ways in which media report crime is imperative because the portrayal of crime in media influences public policy in a manner that not only affects offenders, but also society as a whole (Meloy et al. 2007; Sample 2006). Current sex offender policies, such as sex offender notification, sex offender registration, and “predator-free zones” may represent “feel-safe policies” based on one-size-fits-all responses to sensationalized cases (Meloy et al. 2007). These policies, however, may actually put members of society at greater risk for sex crime victimization. Consider, for example, the risk of homelessness that sex offenders face as a function of stringent residence restrictions. Not only does homelessness make it quite difficult for law enforcement to track sex offenders effectively, but also, stressors to the offender that are produced by homelessness may actually

trigger additional offending.

Although it is not our intent to discount or minimize the acts of many sex offenders, we are concerned about how sex offender myths are reified in the media in a manner which may contribute to the development and implementation of non-evidence-based policies that are ineffective or even downright counterproductive vis-à-vis the process of “crime control theater” (Griffin and Miller 2008). The media have a social responsibility to stop their complicity in the passage of ineffective crime control policies. Quite simply, media must provide the public with better, more accurate information regarding sex offenders and the policies used to control them. This may be accomplished by employing individuals who specialize in these particular areas or collaborating with local universities that specialize in the development of evidence-based policy. In doing so, the public can become better informed about sex-related crimes and those who commit them so that they might make more intelligent decisions about the control policies they should support. Criminologists can also help the media present more accurate information by heeding the call of scholars like Barak (2007) and Katz-Schiavone and Jeglic (2009).⁵

Finally, legislators and other policymakers should adopt evidence-based policies to create offender-specific control or treatment methods that are not over-inclusive. Doing so, however, would require them to recognize that many of the widely-held beliefs regarding sex offenders are not based on empirical proof, but rather are myths. Only when policymakers reject commonly-held myths about sex offenders will effective control policies be designed and implemented. The media can do their part by reporting on sex crimes and offenders more responsibly.

Endnotes

¹ This database includes publications with national scope, such as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and regional newspapers such as *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Denver Post*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and *The St. Petersburg Times*. It may be possible that newspapers to which the Factiva service does not subscribe (e.g., primarily local, rather than regional newspapers) cover sex offenders and sex crimes at a different rate, which would affect the generalizability of this study’s results. Nonetheless, given the number and geographic diversity of the newspapers analyzed in this study from across all major regions of the United States, concerns about the representativeness of the sample should be minimal.

² Connolly-Ahern, Ahern, and Bortree (2009) argue that

large samples are required to achieve representativeness when newswire services are included in comparison to more traditional sources of news content since these media gatekeepers can limit and standardize content. Because Factiva's "Major News and Business Publications" database contains major newswires, we followed the recommendation of Connolly-Ahern, Ahern, and Bortree by including media stories from an entire year because shorter time periods may not achieve representativeness when dealing with crime and justice-related news in light of its unpredictable nature. It should be noted, however, that a content analysis of a full census is unnecessary to achieve representativeness from which generalizations may be made. In fact, Connolly-Ahern, Ahern, and Bortree (2009) recommend sampling from 31 weeks for media content of this nature; we opted, however, to be more inclusive in an effort to increase content validity.

³ One of the articles that was coded differently by the two researchers concerned a difference of opinion concerning whether a sex offender policy was mentioned "in passing" or whether it was discussed in sufficient detail to warrant it being coded as "key." The other article coded differently concerned an oversight, as one researcher failed to code for the presence of a myth that was, in fact, presented in the article.

⁴ The presence or absence of each type of policy was examined separately. Since more than one policy may have been mentioned in an article, the percentages do not add to 100%.

⁵ Because media "commentators—legalistic, journalistic, or politico—are not capable of tackling the same kinds of questions, issues, or problems that policy-oriented criminologists" can address, Barak (2007:201) has called on criminologists to increase their participation in media. By engaging in such newsmaking criminology, Barak argues that experts in crime can help to shape the collective consciousness of society with empirical knowledge, rather than leaving non-experts in the media to construct narratives that sell newspapers and boost ratings, but distort reality. Katz-Schiavone and Jeglic (2009:693) have endorsed newsmaking criminology in the context of sex offenders by calling on criminologists to partner with media to dispel "common myths surrounding sex offender legislation" thereby making reintegration "less daunting."

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