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ATTITUDES TOWARD JUVENILE SEX OFFENDERS

Predictors of Support for Juvenile Sex Offender Registration: Educated Individuals Recognize the Flaws of Juvenile Registration

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We investigated demographic predictors of support for juvenile sex offender registration policies, including education level, gender, political orientation, and age. Participants were 168 individuals recruited from public places in a Midwest community (45% women; M age = 42). In line with hypotheses, as education level increased, support for juvenile registration decreased, as did the belief that juvenile registration protects the community. In addition, as education level increased, belief that the juvenile understood his actions decreased, as did support for juvenile registration when it is framed as ineffective at reducing sex crime. These beliefs mediated the relationship between education level and diminished support for juvenile registration. Implications of these results for the advancement of effective juvenile sex offender policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS sexual offenders, adolescent offenders, child sexual abuse, individual differences, political orientation, education level

Recently, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Child Safety Act (2006) required that all states extend sex offender registration to juveniles. As of May 2011, all but 15 states have complied with the mandate to require
juvenile sex offender registration, and the remaining 15 states will lose 10% of their federal funding if they are not in compliance by July 2011 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). This policy has been implemented despite research showing that juvenile sex offenders’ recidivism rates are lower than adults’ and that registration harms juveniles (Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). Registration laws, although motivated by a public desire to protect society from dangerous sex offenders, have been criticized by social scientists. At best they appear to be ineffective at reducing juvenile sex offenses: Letourneau and Armstrong (2008) found no significant differences in recidivism rates between registered and nonregistered juvenile sex offenders (matched for demographics and crime type). In addition, registration policy has not reduced the rates of child sexual abuse perpetrated by prior adult offenders, nor first time adult offenders (Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008; see also Adkins, Huff, & Stageburg, 2000; Schram & Milloy, 1995).

At worst, registration has been shown to harm offenders (e.g., Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006) in ways that social scientists fear might contribute to future offenses (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010). Depression, hopelessness, stress, difficulty finding housing, difficulty obtaining and maintaining employment, and harassment from the community constitute common experiences of adult registered sex offenders (e.g., Levenson, 2008; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, et al., 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

Registered adolescents are not immune to such negative consequences (Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). For instance, one 15-year-old boy endured relentless harassment from peers when it was discovered that he was on the registry. This abuse was so severe that the boy walked into oncoming traffic as an attempt to commit suicide (Jones, 2007). Perhaps even more concerning, juveniles can be registered for engaging in sexual activity that is common (Stevenson, Najdowski, & Wiley, in press), like consensual sex with a fellow teen, sexting (i.e., sending naked pictures of themselves electronically), or mooning (Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010). Yet social scientists argue that crimes like mooning classmates or consensual teen sex hardly warrant registration (Trivits & Reppucci, 2002; Wright, 2009) and that labeling adolescents as sex offenders, especially for common and nonviolent offenses, might stigmatize them in ways that lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (identifying with and, in turn, becoming a future sex offender; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010). In fact, criminal justice theorists provide compelling evidence that the practical and financial costs associated with maintaining the sex offender registry burdens law enforcement officers in ways that prevent them from effectively protecting society (for an extensive review see Wright, 2009).
Yet recent policy and laws aimed at punishing sex offenders and expanding the registry have proliferated, with little political opposition (Wright, 2009). The 1990s and early 2000s has been marked by numerous federal and state “memorial laws” named after child victims of heinous sexual crimes (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). Politicians are faced with a great deal of pressure to support sex offender registry laws (Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010) because they are heavily endorsed by the public (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007; Phillips, 1998).

Does the public support such laws as applied to juveniles? In one of the few studies to examine this question, Salerno, Najdowski, and colleagues (2010) asked participants whether they believe that juvenile sex offenders should (a) never be registered; (b) be registered, but their information should never be posted online; (c) be registered, but their information should not be posted online until they turn 18; or (d) be registered, and their information should be posted online immediately. Indeed, public support for the full application of the registry was high for juvenile sex offender registration: 93% of participants supported registration for juvenile sex offenders, and of those, most believed the juvenile should be registered online (only 23% believed the juvenile’s information should never be posted online). However, when participants were asked to consider specific types of juvenile sex offenses, support for registration varied as a function of case severity. In fact, forced rape (relative to statutory or nonforced) was the only specific juvenile sex offense that elicited the same level of public support as when participants were asked about sex offender registration in general. Support for juvenile sex offender registration was quite low for crimes like harassment or nonforced sex between two teens—crimes for which juveniles are currently being registered in some states (e.g., Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). These results suggest that most people might believe that only juveniles convicted of rape should be labeled as sex offenders, despite the fact that only 15% of juvenile sex offenders have committed rape (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007).

Stevenson, Sorenson, Smith, Sekely, and Dzwairo (2009) also examined factors that influence public support for registering a juvenile convicted of statutory rape (having nonforced oral sex with a similarly aged teen). They modeled their sex crime vignette after the case of 17-year-old African American boy Genarlow Wilson who was convicted of aggravated sexual molestation and given a 10-year prison sentence for receiving oral sex from a 15-year-old Caucasian girl (Wilson v. State of Georgia, 2006). By experimentally manipulating the juvenile defendant’s and victim’s race (Black or White), they found that support for registration was marginally higher when the defendant and victim were different races than when they were the same race—an effect that might represent lingering negative societal reactions toward interracial relationships. Furthermore, women, but not men, recommended registration more when the victim was White than Black,
possibly illustrating women’s devaluation of the Black victim’s worth. The authors theorized that, due to gender-related social categorization, women likely categorized the female victim as an in-group member and in turn paid more attention to her than men, who probably classified her as an out-group member. Thus, heightened attention to the victim likely caused women to be more influenced by her racial characteristics than men. Finally, the effects of race on support for registration were driven by retributive desires to punish the juvenile offender, not by utilitarian goals to protect society, the presumed legal justification for such laws.

It is known that factors such as sex offense severity and defendant and victim racial characteristics can influence support for registry laws as applied to juveniles. Little is known, however, about individual difference factors that predict support for such laws. In the present study, we examine the influence of education, gender, political orientation, and age on participants’ support for registering juvenile sex offenders. Understanding attitudinal, experiential, and demographic predictors of support for registering juvenile sex offenders has the potential to help identify the types of individuals who are most and least supportive of juvenile registration policies. Identifying determinants of support for juvenile sex offender registration is an important step toward reform of these ineffective policies and in turn the development of future policy designed to effectively treat vulnerable young offenders, many of whom suffer from abuse and mental illness (for a review, see Veneziano & Veneziano, 2002). Next, we review theoretically derived hypotheses depicting how these individual difference factors predict support for juvenile registration.

**EDUCATION LEVEL**

As education level increases, support for registering juveniles might decrease. This can occur because individuals with more education are generally more aware of the developmental and cognitive differences between adolescents and adults. Compared to adults, juveniles possess far less understanding of the legal system and have less developed general reasoning and cognitive abilities (Grisso & Schwartz, 2000). In fact, for many juveniles, committing crimes (including sex crimes; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010) is merely a phase that many adolescents simply outgrow (Bottoms, Repucci, Tweed, & Nyssse-Carris, 2002). Indeed, juvenile sex offenders’ recidivism rates are much lower than adults: approximately 5% to 15% of juvenile sex offenders commit future sex crimes, whereas recidivism estimates for adult sex offenders range from 20% to 40% (Chaffin, 2008; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). It is likely that educated individuals (more than less-educated individuals) understand that many juveniles offend due to cognitive and developmental immaturity and in turn are less likely to recidivate than adult offenders. Due to greater
understanding of their potential for rehabilitation, it can be hypothesized that educated individuals may be less supportive of juvenile registration policy.

In support, research shows that as education increases, so too does knowledge regarding a child’s cognitive development (Quas, Thomson, & Clarke-Stewart, 2005). Specifically, as the education level of participants increases, accuracy in evaluating the suggestibility of child witnesses also increases, perhaps because understanding that children are suggestible requires knowledge of child development (Quas et al., 2005). Research also suggests that education level might predict use of appropriate and effective child-rearing techniques. For instance, compared to people of higher socioeconomic status (SES), people of lower SES, who on average are less educated, are more likely to use corporal punishment to shape their children’s behavior (Straus & Stewart, 1999; also see Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995). This might be because those with more education, compared to those with less education, have had more courses related to psychology and child development and in turn are more aware of the negative consequences of corporal punishment, which include diminished child intelligence, greater childhood behavioral problems, and increased juvenile delinquency (Koenen, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Purcell, 2003; Straus & Paschall, 2009). Thus those with more education might be more sensitive to the developmental needs of children and the normal cognitive and neurological deficits associated with adolescence and are less supportive of policies that are not sensitive to such issues, including juvenile registration.

In support, leading social science experts in the field of children, psychology, and the law (those with expertise in adolescent developmental and cognitive limitations) have openly criticized juvenile sex offender registration policies (e.g., Chaffin, 2008; Letourneau & Miner, 2005; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). Furthermore, Salerno, Najdowski, and colleagues (2010) found that family law attorneys, as compared to non-family-law attorneys (undergraduates, community members, and prosecutors), were less supportive of sex offender registration policies for juveniles than for adults. In other words, only individuals with the most knowledge and experience working with juvenile sex offenders in a family law setting adjusted for age of offender when considering their support for sex offender registration policies.

Of course, an alternative explanation for effects of education level on juvenile registration support could be that more educated individuals are simply more aware of the realities regarding sex offender registration policies—that they are ineffective at reducing sex offenses (Adkins et al., 2000; Letourneau & Armstrong, 2008; Sandler et al., 2008; Schram & Milloy, 1995). There are certainly many logical reasons that help explain why registration policies fail to prevent sex crimes, reasons that educated individuals might be more likely to understand. Although registration policies might help the public identify strangers who are sex offenders in their community, the unfortunate reality is that the vast majority of sex offenses are perpetrated by
known, trusted individuals (e.g., Bachman, 2000; Catalano, Smith, Snyder, & Rand, 2009) and by offenders without documented histories of sex crimes who are not registered as sex offenders (Sandler et al., 2008). Thus, registration policies likely do little, if anything at all, to prevent sex offenses perpetrated by known, trusted individuals with no prior sex offense convictions. For this reason, several rape victim crisis support groups openly condemn sex offender registration policies, reasoning that they were implemented to prevent highly sensationalized stranger rape crimes, crimes that simply are not experienced by the vast majority of their clients (e.g., Coombs, 2006). Perhaps educated individuals are more aware of the realities associated with sexual assault and more skeptical about the effectiveness of registration policies.

GENDER

Gender might also predict support for registering juveniles. On the one hand, women have more negative attitudes toward perpetrators of sex crimes than men (e.g., Bottoms, 1993) and are generally more pro-prosecution than men in cases of child sexual abuse (e.g., Allen & Nightingale, 1997; Bottoms, 1993; Bottoms, Nysse-Carris, Harris, & Tyda, 2003; Crowley, O’Callahan, & Ball, 1994; McAuley & Parker, 2001; Nightingale, 1993; for a review see Bottoms, Golding, Stevenson, Wiley, & Yowziak, 2007). In further support, Redlich (2001) found that, compared to men, women were more supportive of Megan’s Law (requiring sex offender community notification) and were more likely to believe that community notification effectively prevents sex crimes. Thus, just as women support adult sex offender registration policy more than men, so too might women support juvenile sex offender registration more than men.

On the other hand, women generally have more empathy and positive attitudes toward children than men (Bottoms, 1993), suggesting that they may treat juvenile sex offenders (i.e., child offenders) more favorably than men. In support, although mock jury research rarely reveals effects of gender on perceptions of juvenile offenders accused of nonsexual crimes, when there are gender effects, women tend to treat juvenile offenders more leniently than men (for a review, see Stevenson, Najdowski, Bottoms, & Haegerich, 2009). Gender differences in attitudes toward children and child offenders might be explained by the internalization of societal gender norms that women are more caring, empathic, and child-oriented than men (e.g., Barnett & Sinisi, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; also see Maynard & Wiederman, 1997). In other words, social gender roles for women emphasizing nurturance, relationships, and interpersonal skills (Carter, 1990; Mills, McGrath, Sobkoviak, Stupec, & Welsch, 1995) might, in part, explain why women tend to treat child offenders more leniently than men.
The reviewed research presents a complex set of possibilities regarding the influence of gender. Although we are examining reactions toward juvenile offenders (whom women tend to treat more leniently than men, Stevenson, Najdowski, et al., 2009), we are more specifically examining reactions toward juveniles who have committed a sexual offense, and women tend to view sex offenders more negatively than men (Bottoms et al., 2007). Thus, we test competing hypotheses regarding the influence of gender on perceptions of juvenile sex offenders—that women might be more or less supportive of juvenile sex offender registration than men.

**POLITICAL ORIENTATION**

Political conservatives, on average, hold criminals more responsible for their actions than political liberals (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987), suggesting that conservatives might be more supportive of juvenile registration than liberals. Attribution theory provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how political orientation influences judgments. The fundamental attribution error, a well-established social psychological phenomenon, is the tendency to make internal attributions for others’ behavior instead of external attributions, or, in other words, to blame the individual instead of the situation (e.g., Jones & Harris, 1967). Although both liberals and conservatives make the fundamental attribution error, conservatives tend to be less likely than liberals to correct their initial internal attributions by taking the situation into account (Carroll et al., 1987; Pellegrini, Querolo, Monarrez, & Valenzuela, 1997; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, & Brady, 1986; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In contrast, liberals are more likely than conservatives to correct their initial internal attributions by considering situational factors that contribute to behavior (i.e., making external attributions; e.g., Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002; Williams, 1984). Thus, conservatives might be more likely than liberals to attribute a juvenile’s sexual offense to internal factors (that he is sexually deviant, immoral, etc.) and in turn support registering the juvenile as a sex offender more than liberals.

Other research, however, suggests that political conservatives and liberals may not differ in their attitudes toward the abuse of children in general (Stevenson, Bottoms, & Diamond, 2010) and might react similarly to child sexual abuse and juvenile registration. Illustrating this possibility, both liberal and conservative politicians have demonstrated unwavering support of sex offender registration policy (Wright, 2009), likely because they fear that not supporting registration policy has the potential to ruin their political career (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010). The present research tests these competing possible effects of political orientation on support for juvenile registration.
Finally, little is known regarding whether age influences reactions toward juvenile sex offenses. This question is of practical, methodological importance because a great deal of psychology and law research employs younger undergraduates, and it is important to know whether such research generalizes to a more representative community member sample. It is possible, for instance, that younger participants might feel more similar to a young juvenile offender than older participants and thus treat a juvenile sex offender more favorably (be less supportive of registration). In support, as perceived similarity toward defendants increases, leniency in case judgments also increases (Davis, Bray, & Holt, 1977; Mitchel, Haw, Pfeifer, & Meissner, 2005). Alternatively, because experience with children naturally increases as age increases, older participants, compared to younger participants, might be more aware of the cognitive limitations associated with adolescence (as are educated individuals) and in turn less supportive of juvenile registration. Yet, a meta-analysis by Bornstein (1999) revealed few differences in mock trial case judgments between undergraduates and community members across various cases. In addition, research reveals few differences between younger, undergraduate samples and older, community member samples in reactions toward child sexual abuse (Bottoms et al., 2007). And Goodman, Bottoms, Redlich, Shaver, and Beety (1998) found no relationship between parental status or length of time spent with children and case judgments in a child sexual abuse case. Similarly, an Australian study assessing perceptions of child sexual abuse revealed no differences between undergraduates and community members in verdict preferences, beliefs about the accuracy of the child’s memory, or perceptions of the child’s suggestibility—additional proxy variables for beliefs about children (Crowley et al., 1994). Although few sample differences have been found in mock jury research to date, it is important to continue to explore this methodologically relevant question. Thus, we examine the influence of age on juvenile registration support.

STUDY OVERVIEW

To test our theoretically derived hypotheses, we presented participants with a vignette depicting a juvenile sex offense. To increase ecological validity, we modeled this case after two actual statutory rape cases (Dixon v. State of Georgia, 2004; Wilson v. State of Georgia, 2006) and purposely selected a non-forced-rape case because forced rape accounts for only a minority (15%) of juvenile sex crimes (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). Participants then indicated their support for registering the juvenile as a sex offender, followed by questions designed to measure the underlying psychological
constructs that drive participant’s support for juvenile registration, such as beliefs about the effectiveness of registration, perceived societal threat of the juvenile sex offender, and sensitivity toward the developmental cognitive limitations of juveniles. Finally, participants completed various demographic questions including education level, gender, political orientation, and age, enabling us to test for these hypothesized main effects.

METHOD

Participants

We approached 230 community members from a Midwest city, and 73% agreed to participate, for a total sample size of 168 participants (45% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 42, SD = 14$; 90% Caucasian, 2% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 3% other). One percent had some high school experience, 17% had a high school diploma, 32% had some college experience, 9% had an associate’s degree, 29% had a bachelor’s degree, and 11% had a master’s degree. No participants had professional degrees beyond the master’s level. Two percent of participants were extremely liberal, 16% were liberal, 14% were slightly liberal, 27% were moderate, 15% were slightly conservative, 21% were conservative, and 5% were extremely conservative.

Materials

All participants read a scenario modified by the case employed by Salerno, Najdowski, and colleagues (2010) and Stevenson, Sorenson, and colleagues (2009). In the case, a 15-year-old defendant (Jacob) was convicted of statutory rape (i.e., he videotaped oral sex with a minor). Support for registering the juvenile as a sex offender was assessed on the following 4-point scale, with greater numbers indicating more support for the full application of the registry: 1 (Jacob should not be required to register at all with law enforcement in his community), 2 (Jacob should be required to register, but his information should never be posted on the Internet), 3 (Jacob should be required to register, but his information should not be posted on the Internet until he turns 18, at which time his information should be publicly posted

1 There were originally two defendant and victim race conditions (Black or White) and two victim age conditions (the victim was 12 or 15 years old). Because we were not interested in the effects of these variables for the purposes of this study, we conducted all analyses collapsed across these variables. Supporting our decision to do so, there were no significant interactions involving the demographic variables of political orientation, age, and education level and the original independent variables of defendant and victim race and victim age on any dependent variables, all interaction term $\beta$s < .61, all ns. Although there were some interactions of gender and victim race, these effects, along with the main effects of race and victim age, are reported by Stevenson, Sorenson, and colleagues (2009).
on the Internet), and 4 (Jacob should be required to register and his information should be publicly posted on the Internet immediately). Next, on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), participants answered the following questions: (a) “I would support the sex offender registry for juveniles like Jacob even if there is no scientific evidence showing that it reduces sexual abuse,” (b) “Jacob poses a danger to society,” (c) “Registry laws make the community safer by allowing people to keep track of the juvenile sex offenders like Jacob in their community,” and (d) “Jacob understood the sexual implications of his behavior.” All items were modified by items originally developed by Salerno, Najdowski, and colleagues (2010) and used by Stevenson, Sorenson, and colleagues (2009).

Participants indicated their age, gender, and political orientation, with response options coded as the following: 1 (extremely liberal), 2 (liberal), 3 (slightly liberal), 4 (moderate), 5 (slightly conservative), 6 (conservative), and 7 (extremely conservative). Finally, participants indicated their education level, with response options coded as the following: 1 (some high school), 2 (high school diploma), 3 (some college), 4 (associate's degree), 5 (bachelor's degree), 6 (master's degree), 7 (JD), and 8 (Doctorate).

Procedure
We approached community members in public places and invited them to participate in this study. We targeted public locations where people were likely to have spare time, including the mall, public libraries, and gas stations. To eliminate biases in participant selection, all visible participants in the vicinity of our data collection site were recruited and we recorded response rates. Participants were not recruited only if they were having conversations or eating. Participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a short survey assessing their attitudes toward certain crimes involving sexuality. Participants were also told that their responses were completely anonymous, that participation was totally voluntary, and that they could stop participating at any time. After participants read the vignette describing the case, they then completed the case judgments and demographic questions. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and given a candy bar as compensation. Individual participation lasted approximately five minutes and data collection was completed within six months. This study was approved by the University of Evansville Institutional Review Board (protocol 2008-2009-psychology-01).

RESULTS
We conducted a series of correlations to examine the influence of education, political orientation, gender, and age on support for registering a juvenile
sex offender and various case judgments. Gender was dummy coded such that 0 represented women and 1 represented men.

Main Effects of Individual Difference Variables

In line with hypotheses, as education level increased, support for registering the juvenile significantly decreased, as did support for registration even if it is not effective, the belief that registration makes the community safer, and the belief that the juvenile understood the sexual implications of his actions (see Table 1). Political conservatives were significantly more likely than political liberals to believe that registering the juvenile as a sex offender will make the community safer. As participant age increased, the belief that the juvenile is dangerous significantly increased. Finally, men were marginally more likely than women to believe that the juvenile is dangerous. No other main effects reached statistical significance (see Table 1).

Mediation Analyses

Because education level significantly predicted support for registration (our primary dependent variable), we conducted mediation analyses testing whether case judgments mediated the effect of education level on support

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2 Although we had no theoretical reason to expect interactions, we nonetheless conducted a series of exploratory linear regression analyses testing for the possibility of 2-way interactions. First, we created 2-way interaction terms using centered variables, thereby eliminating possible multicollinearity. After entering all main effects in the first step in the regression equation, we next entered all possible 2-way interaction terms in the second step of the regression. Due to sample size limitations, we did not have enough power to detect possible 3-way or 4-way interactions, and because we did not have theoretical reason to expect them, we did not include them in the regression equation. Because we do have a theoretically justified reason to expect main effects of education, political orientation, gender, and age, we did not apply a special statistical correction for a type I error for these main effects, in line with Keppel’s (1991) suggestions. Yet, because we had no theoretical reason to expect 2-way interactions between these factors, all 2-way interaction analyses represent unplanned comparisons and therefore elevate the risk of a type I error. We therefore applied the Bonferroni test as a statistical correction for all 2-way interaction analyses (Keppel, 1991). There were no statistically significant 2-way interactions, all βs < .14, all ns. Thus, we present only the results of the theoretically proposed main effects of all independent variables.

3 Because significant relations between our predictors might exist, we conducted a series of correlations testing the relationships between all of the predictors. Only one significant and one marginally significant relationship emerged: (a) political conservatives were less educated than political liberals (r = −.16, p < .05), and (b) men were marginally less educated than women (r = −.15, p < .10). No other correlations reached significance, all rs < .07, all ns. Thus, the possibility of suppression of our hypothesized effects (due to the interrelationship of some predictors) precludes the use of multiple linear regression analyses (i.e., entering all predictors simultaneously in a regression model). In support, a series of linear regression analyses in which our predictors were entered simultaneously into the regression model revealed multiple instances of suppression (several hypothesized effects changed from significant to marginal or not significant). Thus, because we found several instances of suppression of our hypothesized effects using multiple regression, we have presented correlation analyses to test for the hypothesized effects of our individual difference variables.
TABLE 1 Correlation Matrix Illustrating Relations between Education Level, Political Orientation, Age, Gender, and Case Judgments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Political orientation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for registry</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for the registry even if it is not effective</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief registration makes the community safer</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief the juvenile is dangerous</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.11†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief the juvenile understood the sexual implications of his behavior</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Men were coded as 1 and women as 0. Greater values indicated higher education levels, politically conservative scores, and greater age.

†p < .10. *p < .05.

for registration, in line with Baron and Kenny’s (1986) recommendations. According to Baron and Kenny, the first step of a mediational model is to show that the independent variable (education level) predicts the dependent variable (support for the registry), as illustrated by the correlations reported previously. The second step is to show that the independent variable predicts the proposed mediators, which our previously conducted correlations revealed for several variables: (a) support for the registry even without evidence that it reduces abuse, (b) belief that registering the juvenile makes the community safer, and (c) the belief that the juvenile understood the sexual implications of his behavior. Because education level did not significantly predict the belief that the juvenile is dangerous, this variable logically cannot mediate the effects of education level on support for the registry and was therefore not considered in mediation analyses.

The third step is to show that the three proposed mediators (support for the registry even without evidence that it reduces abuse, belief that registration makes the community safer, and the belief that Jacob understood the sexual implications of his behavior) are significantly related to the dependent variable (support for the registry), and correlations indicate that they all are significantly related (rs > .39, p < .001). The final step is to show that when both the independent variable and the proposed mediators are entered into a regression equation simultaneously, (a) the mediator beta coefficients are significant and (b) the independent variable (education level) beta coefficient is no longer significant (full mediation) or is reduced significantly (partial mediation). This would illustrate that the mediators account for the same variance in case judgments as the independent variable (education level). We tested a multiple mediation model by including all mediators simultaneously in the regression equation, in line with Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998)’s recommendation. According to Kenny and colleagues, a multiple mediation model (as opposed to testing each mediator individually) provides the advantage.
of allowing for a test of the overall effect of all the mediators as well as testing for possible suppression (by testing the unique effects of each mediator while controlling for the possible effects of the other mediators).

When education level and the three proposed mediators were simultaneously entered into a regression predicting support for registration, the effect of education on support for registration was no longer significant, illustrating mediation. (See Table 2 and Figure 1 for all beta and significance values.) Supporting registration even without evidence of its effectiveness and the belief that registration makes the community safer significantly predicted support for registration. The belief that Jacob understood the sexual implications of his behavior marginally predicted support for registration. Sobel tests revealed that the belief that registration made the community safer was a significant mediator. Support for registration even without evidence of its effectiveness and the belief that Jacob understood his behavior emerged as marginal mediators.

**DISCUSSION**

As elaborated here, we found support for some of our theoretically derived competing hypotheses regarding possible effects of education level, gender, political orientation, and age on perceptions of juvenile sex offenders. Next, we explain which hypotheses were supported and the policy-related implications of these findings.

**Education Level**

We found relatively pervasive effects of education level on attitudes toward juvenile sex offender registration such that as education level increased, support for juvenile registration even if it is ineffective decreased, the belief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Regression Analyses Testing Mediators of the Effects of Education Level on Support for the Registry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Including mediator variables in the regression equation</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level a support for registry:</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for registry and mediators:</td>
<td>Support for the registry even if it is ineffective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Belief that registration made the community safer</td>
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<td>Belief the juvenile understood his behavior</td>
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†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
that juvenile registration makes the community safer decreased, and the belief that the juvenile understood his actions significantly decreased. These beliefs mediated educated participants’ diminished support for juvenile registration. In other words, educated participants’ diminished support for juvenile registration if it is ineffective, diminished belief that juvenile registration protects the community, and diminished belief that the juvenile understood the consequences of his behavior appear, in part, to explain why educated participants (as compared to less educated participants) were less supportive of juvenile registration. This is consistent with past research demonstrating that education predicts greater understanding of child cognitive development (Quas et al., 2005) and a more accurate understanding of factors that interfere with optimal child development (e.g., corporal punishment; e.g., Koenen et al., 2003).

It is particularly interesting that educated participants were more likely than less educated participants to correctly recognize that the registry is ineffective in protecting their community. Perhaps educated participants simply have more exposure to the social sciences or related fields, providing them with a more accurate understanding of the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of various legal policies. Of importance, the beliefs endorsed by educated participants (versus less-educated participants) are more in line with social scientific evidence regarding juvenile sex offenders (for a review, see Chaffin, 2008). Such findings have implications relevant to the development of effective and socially supported laws regarding the
treatment of juvenile sex offenders. Because juvenile sex offender registration laws are better understood and in turn less supported by educated individuals, programs aimed at increasing public understanding of juvenile registration laws might reduce public support for them. Education-oriented policymakers and social scientists should, therefore, develop programs that promote public understanding of juvenile registration laws. To the extent that increased understanding of these ineffective laws diminishes public support for them, politicians and lawmakers will be better positioned to slow the growth of harmful juvenile registration policies and promote the development of policies designed to allocate more effective, rehabilitative mental health services to juveniles who commit sex offenses (for reviews of these services, see Chaffin, 2008; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002).

We did not, however, find that education predicts the belief that the juvenile is dangerous. That is, although juvenile sex offenders are actually less likely to reoffend than adult sex offenders and thus pose less threat to society (Chaffin, 2008; Trivits & Reppucci 2002), education does not predict this belief. Indeed, not only does the public overestimate the recidivism rates of adult sex offenders (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007), but they also overestimate the recidivism rates of juvenile sex offenders (50% estimated juvenile recidivism rates; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010; versus 5–15% actual juvenile recidivism rates; Chaffin, 2008). Thus, even though education does predict accurate attitudes regarding the ineffectiveness of registering juvenile sex offenders, it does not appear to mitigate fear of juvenile sex offenders in general. Advocates of effective child-oriented policy should attempt to correct documented public overestimations of juvenile sex offender recidivism rates (Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010)—mistakes that have the potential to drive support for ineffective and harmful juvenile registration policies.

Gender

Surprisingly, there were few main effects of gender on perceptions of juvenile sex offender registration. We did, however, find that men were marginally more likely than women to believe that the juvenile is dangerous. This effect is in line with research showing that women (as compared to men) generally have more positive attitudes toward children (Bottoms, 1993). Furthermore, although there are seldom gender differences in adults’ reactions toward juvenile crime, when there are, women tend to treat child offenders more leniently than men (for a review, see Stevenson, Najdowski, et al., 2009). It is possible that gender differences in attitudes toward non-sexual juvenile crime translate into gender differences in attitudes toward juvenile sexual offenses. Because women tend to have more positive attitudes toward children than men (Bottoms, 1993), they may perceive juvenile sex offenders as less sexually deviant, more innocently childlike, and less
dangerous. Yet, this one marginally significant effect of participant gender is overwhelmed by the overall lack of significant gender effects.

As previously articulated, there were reasons to predict competing hypotheses regarding the influence of gender on perceptions of juvenile sex offender registration. Although some research suggests that women tend to treat juvenile offenders more leniently than men, other mock jury research shows that women generally react more negatively toward perpetrators of child sexual abuse than men (i.e., they vote guilty more often; for a review, see Bottoms et al., 2007). Furthermore, Bottoms (1993) found that gender differences in attitudes toward child sexual assault are explained by gender differences in empathy toward child victims, attitudes toward child sexual assault, and general believability of child witnesses. Because we examined reactions toward children (juveniles) who commit sex offenses, it is possible that women’s pro-child-perpetrator attitudes (Stevenson, Najdowski, et al., 2009) interfered with their anti-sex-offender attitudes (for a review, see Bottoms et al., 2007) and in turn canceled out effects of gender. Thus, our study is in line with the results of research examining reactions toward nonsexual juvenile crime, which also generally finds few effects of gender (Stevenson, Najdowski, et al., 2009). Future research should examine possible moderating factors that make gender effects more or less likely to manifest in attitudes toward juvenile sex offenders (e.g., severity of juvenile sex offense).

**Political Orientation**

Contrary to expectations, we found few effects of political orientation on attitudes toward juvenile sex offender registration. We did, however, find that political conservatives were more likely than liberals to believe that juvenile registration makes the community safer. This supports research revealing that political conservatives tend to endorse a more punitive, crime-control orientation than liberals (Carroll et al., 1987). Yet the overall lack of political orientation effects suggests that liberals and conservatives may react relatively similarly toward juvenile sex crimes, as they do toward child abuse generally (Stevenson et al., 2010). It is possible that attitudes toward sex offenses might simply be one bipartisan issue that unites otherwise divided political parties. In support, sex offender registration laws have faced little to no opposition in courts, perhaps in part because politicians of any party fear that opposing such laws would make them seem “soft on sex crime” and result in the death of their political career (Quinn et al., 2004; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010).

Unmitigated hatred of sex offenders has perpetuated unrestricted growth of punitive policies that corrode sex offenders’ civil liberties (e.g., Quinn et al., 2004; Wright, 2009), legal trends that are endorsed by legislators of all political parties. For instance, Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman (1998)
published an article in an APA journal suggesting that the link between child sexual abuse and long-term psychological problems has been overstated by researchers and is actually quite small. In an unprecedented decision, Congress voted to condemn this peer-reviewed article after growing public outrage that the authors (and, in turn, APA) appeared to consider child sexual abuse to be harmless. Even though a conservative congressional representative (Tom DeLay) spearheaded this movement, not a single member of Congress voted against the congressional condemnation of this peer-reviewed journal, although 13 members abstained from voting (Baird, 2002). Yet even abstaining from voting came with costs: Many of those who abstained were targeted during elections with campaign ads claiming they supported sex offenders (Garrison & Kobor, 2002). The aftermath of this psychological and political controversy illustrates how politicians, regardless of political orientation, are reluctant to make political decisions that could be construed as sympathetic to sex offenders and may help explain why we found few effects of political orientation on perceptions of juvenile sex offenders.

Age

Although there were few age effects, older participants found the juvenile more dangerous than younger participants, possibly because younger participants might feel more similar to young juvenile offenders than older participants (e.g., Mitchel et al., 2005). Yet one significant effect of age is negligible relative to the pervasive lack of age effects. This lack of age effects, however, parallels Bornstein’s (1999) meta-analysis, which revealed few differences in case judgments between younger undergraduate and older community member samples across many different mock trials. Thus, just as age fails to predict reactions toward child sexual abuse (e.g., Bottoms et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 1998), age also appears to have little influence on perceptions of juvenile sex crimes. These results provide preliminary evidence that research on perceptions of juvenile sex offenders involving undergraduate samples is likely to generalize to a more representative community member sample.

Limitations, Future Research, and Policy Implications

Although the present study provides an important first step in understanding how various individual difference factors predict attitudes toward juvenile sex offender registration, future research should employ longer, more detailed case vignettes or videotaped case simulations to increase ecological validity. Even so, our sex offense vignette was modeled after two actual cases and therefore has a good deal of realism.
Future research should also employ different types of juvenile sex crimes, including more severe forced rape cases. Yet a statutory rape case is arguably preferable as a first step for several reasons. First, understanding reactions toward nonviolent juvenile sex offenses, like statutory rape, is more ecologically valid than examining reactions toward less common (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007) but more sensationalized forced rape cases. In addition, allowing participants to consider juvenile sex offenses generally, while interesting, likely tells us only about how participants are likely to react toward less common, forced rape cases because these are the types of cases people spontaneously envision when asked about sex offenses generally (Salerno, Najdowski, et al., 2010). Even so, future research should examine individual difference predictors of more severe yet less common types of juvenile sex offenses, including forced rape. It is possible, for instance, that forced rape might elicit the same types of gender effects that we find in research on perceptions of child sexual assault (for a review, see Bottoms et al., 2007), a possibility that should be addressed in future research.

In addition, future research should continue to explore additional underlying psychological constructs explaining effects of education level on registration support. It is also possible that individuals who have educational backgrounds specifically relevant to child development might be particularly accurate in their understanding of special issues regarding registering juveniles as sex offenders. Furthermore, future research including a more racially diverse sample would allow for exploration of ethnicity as a predictor of support for juvenile sex offender registration policy.

Finally, because education is associated with reduced support for juvenile registration, developing educational programs that highlight the special needs of juvenile sex offenders has the potential to reduce support for current juvenile registration policies—policies shown to be ineffective (Adkins et al., 2000; Letourneau & Armstrong, 2008; Sandler et al., 2008; Schram & Milloy, 1995) and harmful (e.g., Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). To the extent that knowledge empowers individuals to oppose otherwise popular yet ineffective juvenile registration policies, programs should be developed to educate legislators and policymakers who have the power to shape these policies. Such programs have the potential to promote existing effective juvenile sex offender policies aimed at providing rehabilitative and mental health services to youthful offenders (for reviews, see Chaffin, 2008; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002), services that are far more likely to prevent future sexual assault.

CONCLUSION

The current research puts us closer to a more complete understanding of demographic factors and attitudes that drive support for juvenile sex offender
registration policies. Understanding determinants of support for these controversial and ineffective policies provides implications for stemming the tide of increasingly inclusive sex offender registration policies. Reduced adherence to ineffective juvenile registration policies allow greater room for consideration and implementation of effective rehabilitative services for juveniles who commit sex crimes, services that are in line with the rehabilitative goals of our juvenile justice system. It is an unfortunate reality that many juvenile sex offenders come from unsupportive and chaotic families, suffer from mental illnesses, and were themselves victims of physical or sexual abuse (for a review, see Veneziano & Veneziano, 2002). Placing such vulnerable youth on a sex offender registry does little (arguably nothing) to prevent future sex crimes and protect society (Letourneau & Armstrong, 2008). Instead it causes a great deal of suffering and harm to these still developing and now stigmatized child offenders and their families (for reviews, see Chaffin, 2008; Salerno, Stevenson, et al., 2010; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). Educating the public, especially policymakers, about the iatrogenic consequences of juvenile registration policies has the potential to promote more effective treatment for youth who commit sex crimes and prevent future sex crimes.

REFERENCES


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