

Attitudes Toward the Treatment of Sex Offenders: A SEM Analysis

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Evidence suggests that public attitudes toward sex offenders are often complex, which is partly due to the lack of sophisticated measures that capture different dimensions of individual attitudes. This article examined public attitudes toward sex offenders and their specific attitudes toward sex offender treatment using 2 validated attitudinal scales among a group of 316 psychology students at a southern public university. Structural equation modeling (SEM) method was used to test the relation between the general attitude and treatment specific attitude. Findings indicated an acceptable model fit with the data (e.g., CFI = .95, SRMR = .07, and RMSEA = .06). Attitudes toward sex offenders and the level of concern for victims are significantly related to individual attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders. Females were found to hold less negative attitudes toward sex offenders than males. The implications of the findings in relation to policy and program development are discussed.

In recent years, there appears to be an unprecedented explosion in sexual crime as covered in mass media. The public has become more aware of and concerned about sexual crime, and public attitudes toward sex offenders have become increasingly punitive (Brown, 1999; Purvis, Ward, & Devilly,

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2003). Consequently, new legislation pertaining to the sentencing of convicted sex offenders has focused on containment and monitoring rather than treatment and rehabilitation. However, research findings suggest that treatment programs for sex offenders are effective in decreasing subsequent sexual recidivism (Abracen & Looman, 2005). Knowledge about public attitudes towards sex offenders and their treatment is important in that such attitudes can influence personal reactions, policies, and legislative decision-making.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX OFFENDERS: DIFFERENCES AMONG SOCIAL GROUPS

Previous studies examining public attitudes toward criminals and their punishment suggest that attitudes vary among different social groups (Brown, 1999; Hogue, 1993). Hogue (1993) found that personnel who work closely with sex offenders tend to hold more positive views toward them than personnel whose involvement is limited or indirect. Members of prison reform groups, volunteers in prison rehabilitation, and prisoners themselves were found to have more positive attitudes toward prisoners than correctional officers and law enforcement officers (Lea, Auburn, & Kibblewhite, 1999).

Evidence suggests that those who have no contact with sex offenders in their work might hold different views about this group. Griffin and West (2006) recommended that researchers study the attitudes of community members toward sex offenders in order to estimate how much knowledge people have about this population and how their knowledge, or lack thereof, translates into emotional reactions and firmly held attitudes. Ferguson and Ireland (2006) reached similar conclusions when they compared college students and staff members who worked in forensic settings. They found that the close tie between more exposure and more positive attitudes is applicable to people who do not work with sex offenders, except for those who have been sexually victimized and those close to someone who was a victim of such a crime.

Other factors highlighted in the literature as critical to individuals' attitudes toward sex offenders included gender, severity of crime, victim types, and offenders' social-economic status (Fedoroff & Moran, 1997; Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Lea et al., 1999). For example, female participants tended to agree upon a minimum period of incarceration followed by treatment for sex offenders (Valliant, Furac, & Antonowicz, 1994). Sex offenders who had child victims were considered to be more immoral and perceived more negatively than sex offenders who had adult women victims (Weekes, Pelletier, & Beaudette, 1995).

Review of previous literature leads to a conclusion that sex offenders are viewed negatively by members of specific professions (e.g., mental health professionals and researchers) and the public (Griffin & West, 2006).

However, categorization of attitudes into “negative” or “positive” may not be sufficient to reflect the subtle differences in the attitudes. Thus, a measure that assesses various aspects of attitudes is critical to the understanding of public attitudes toward sex offenders. Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, and Sun (2008) developed and validated a measure, the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO), that specifically addresses the public’s attitudes toward sex offenders. The CATSO is comprised of four subscales that measure public attitudes in terms of sex offenders’ social isolation, capacity to change, severity/dangerousness, and deviancy.

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE TREATMENT OF SEX OFFENDERS

It is highly possible that individuals who have a lenient attitude toward sex offenders would favor treatment over punishment for sex offenders. Yet public attitude toward the treatment of sex offenders is not well understood. Opinions based upon misinformation and stereotypes often trigger negative attitudes toward treatment programs for sex offenders (Abracen & Looman, 2005). There is a belief that long and punitive sentences are preliminary and crucial prior to treatment and release among many people (Valliant, Furac & Antonowicz, 1994), and some people would not believe that sex offender treatment is effective even in light of research evidence that treatment programs (such as hormonal medication and cognitive-behavior approach) decrease recidivism rates and effectively reintegrate sex offenders into the community (Lösel & Schmucker, 2006). Even for those who understand the importance of treatment, there is an opposition to having a treatment facility for sex offenders built in their communities and an obvious rejection of accepting known sex offenders back into their own community (Valliant, Furac, & Antonowicz, 1994). While many in the public tend to favor punishment, there is also widespread support for treatment and a prevailing belief that rehabilitation is possible and needs to be made available to sex offenders (Brown, 1999; McCorkle, 1993).

Given the complicated nature of public attitudes toward sex offender treatment, it is essential to have a validated scale to capture such complexity. Wnuk, Chapman, and Jeglic (2006) developed the Attitudes Toward Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO) and have used it among the general public and professionals. Wnuk and colleagues suggest that beliefs that sex offenders should not be treated and that treatment does not work are not necessarily associated with attitudes toward mandatory treatment. Because the ATTSO and CATSO are recently developed scales, few studies have used these scales to systematically examine the public’s general attitudes toward sex offenders and specific attitude toward sex offender treatment. As indicated by Church et al. (2008), the CATSO and ATTTSO should be used together to study general and treatment-specific views of sex offenders.

PURPOSES OF STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relation between predicting variables and the attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders as hypothesized in Figure 1. As illustrated in Figure 1, demographics (gender, political stance, and history of sex offense of a family member) influence general attitude toward sex offenders and the degree to which the participant's concerns about sex offenders and their general attitudes toward sex offenders directly influence attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders. Specifically, the study answered the following research questions:

1. What are general attitudes toward sex offenders and their specific-treatment views of sex offenders?
2. Are the attitudes toward sex offenders associated with the treatment of sex offenders after controlling for factors such as severity of sex offense and demographic variables?
3. Does the proposed model fit with the data?

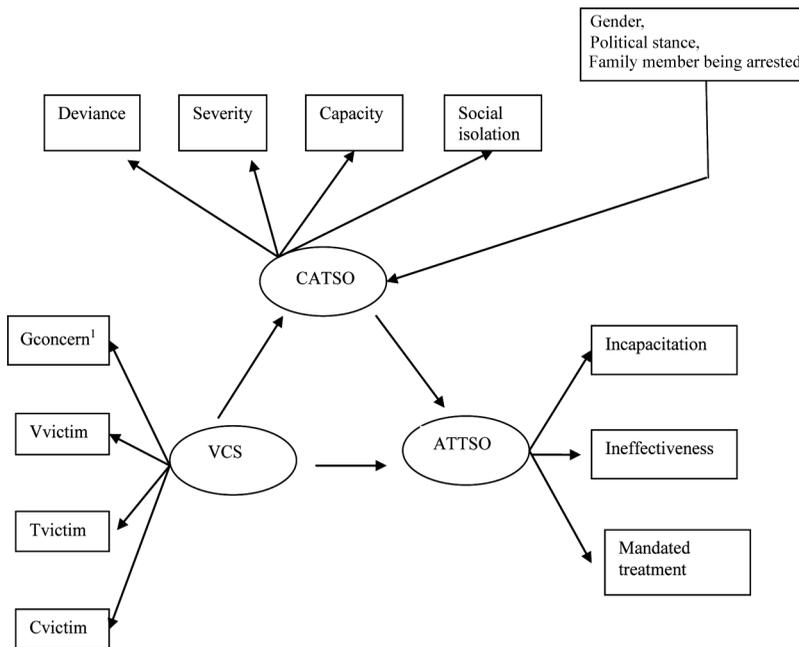


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model predicting attitudes toward treatment of sex offenders. ATTSO = Attitudes Toward Treatment of Sex Offenders; CATSO = Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders; VCS = Victim Concern Scale; ¹Gconcern = general concerns; Vvictim = concerns toward vulnerable or violent crime victims; Tvictim = concerns toward property crime/theft victims; and Cvictim = concerns toward culpable victims.

METHODS

Study Design

Because of the difficulty achieving a representative sample of the general public, this study, like many attitudinal studies (Brown, 1999; Vallient, Furac, & Antonowicz, 1994), surveyed a convenience sample of undergraduate students who were enrolled in an introductory psychology class at a Southern public university. Participants were awarded research credit for their participation in this study on “attitudes relating to victims, offenders, and the law.” Standardized questionnaires were handed to a total of 344 participants who completed this study; however, 28 participants were removed from the analyses due to high scores on a measure of impression management (the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding; for further explanation of exclusion criteria, see Paulhus, 1998), resulting in a total of 316 participants for this analysis. The majority of participants were female (74.7%) and Caucasian (81.0%), with an average age of 18.8 years. The remaining participants racially identified themselves as African American (13.3%), Latino/Hispanic (2.2%), biracial (1.3%), or other ethnicities (2.2%).

Demographics and Background Variables

In addition to demographic variables such as age, gender, and race, participant’s political stance and their family background were assessed. The participants’ political stance was measured using a 5-point scale that asked participants to rate the degree of their political stance from 1 (*very conservative*) to 5 (*very liberal*). Participants were asked if they had had a family member who had ever been arrested. “Yes” was coded 1, and “No” was coded 2.

Predicting Variables

THE COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX OFFENDERS (CATSO)

The CATSO is an 18-item psychometric instrument that assesses attitudes toward sex offenders (Church et al., 2007). The latent construct CATSO consists of four sub-scales: Social Isolation, Capacity to Change, Severity/Dangerousness, and Deviancy. Participants rated on a six-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) to a given statement. Social Isolation is comprised of five items. For example, one question reads “Sex offenders have difficulty making friends even if they try real hard.” Higher scores on this subscale indicate the beliefs about sex offenders as persons who are loners. Capacity to Change is comprised of five items. One question reads “Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison.” Higher scores on this subscale indicate beliefs about sex offenders as persons who are unlikely to change. Severity/Dangerousness is comprised of five items. One question

reads “The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes.” Higher scores on this subscale indicate that sex offenders are especially dangerous and commit overly serious crimes. The Deviancy subscale had three items. One item reads “Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity.” Higher scores indicated sex offenders are sexually preoccupied. The Cronbach alpha values were obtained for each subscale (Social Isolation, $\alpha = .80$; Capacity to Change, $\alpha = .80$; Severity/Dangerousness, $\alpha = .70$; and Deviancy, $\alpha = .43$).

THE VICTIM CONCERN SCALE (VCS)

The VCS is a 22-item psychometric instrument that assesses concern for victims (Clements, Brannen, Kirkley, Gordon, & Church, 2006). The VCS assesses participants' level of concern for subcategories of victims: general concern, vulnerable or violent crime victims, property crime/theft victims, and culpable victims. The VCS uses a 5-point rating scale with scores ranging from 1 (*not concerned*) to 5 (*extremely concerned*). Higher scores indicate greater concerns about this group of victims. The VCS has demonstrated good internal consistency on this sample (general concern, $\alpha = .93$; violence victims, $\alpha = .91$; property victims, $\alpha = .83$; and culpable victims, $\alpha = .86$).

Outcome Variable

THE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE TREATMENT OF SEX OFFENDERS (ATTSO)

The ATTSO is 15-item psychometric instrument that assesses attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6 (Wnuk et al., 2006). The ATTSO consists of three sub-scales: Incapacitation, Treatment Ineffectiveness, and Mandated Treatment. Incapacitation has eight items ranging in score from 8 to 48, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement that sex offenders should not be treated. For example, one item reads “Sex offenders should never be released”. We obtained a Cronbach alpha of .85 for Incapacitation. Treatment Ineffectiveness has four items ranging in score from 4 to 24, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement that treatment does not work. The Cronbach alpha of Treatment Ineffectiveness was .82. One item reads “Treatment programs for sex offenders are effective”. Mandated Treatment is comprised of three items ranging in score from 3 to 18, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement that mandatory treatment is necessary. One item reads “It is important that that all sex offenders being released receive treatment”. We obtained a Cronbach alpha of .68 for this subscale.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were used to describe the sample characteristics and the distribution of the two attitude measures. Correlation analyses were then

performed to reveal the relationships the predicting variables and outcome variable. Finally, a structural equation modeling method using maximum likelihood estimation was used to test the measurement model, and then to examine the hypothesized relationships among these variables via LISREL 8.54 (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). A significance level of .05 is used across the article unless otherwise noted.

RESULTS

As presented in Table 1, the average age of the participants was 18.8 years. Fewer than half of them reported that they had a family member who had been arrested. On average, the participants reported a more liberal political stance. Their attitudes toward sex offenders were complex. When examining the CATSO, on average, participant scores were low on three of the four subscales: social isolation ($M = 13.9$, $SD = 4.2$), severity ($M = 17.2$, $SD = 4.4$), and deviance ($M = 9.2$, $SD = 2.5$). However, when capacity to change was examined, the scores were above average ($M = 25.1$, $SD = 3.2$). Thus, there is some indication that these participants tend to perceive sex offenders as those who would not change their behaviors. As indicated by the scores of each ATTSO subscale, participants tend to support sex offender treatment ($M = 23.2$, $SD = 6.9$) and mandatory treatment ($M = 14.9$, $SD = 2.5$), but on average they leaned toward not believing that treatment was effective ($M = 14.5$, $SD = 2.2$).

TABLE 1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

Demographics	%/ M (SD) $N = 344$	Range
Age	18.8 (2.2)	17–47
Female	74.9%	
Caucasians	81%	
Having a family member been arrested	43.4%	
Political stance	2.5 (1.3)	1–5
Predicting variables VCS		
General concern	30.6 (6.6)	8–40
Violent crime victims	25.8 (3.8)	6–30
Property theft victims	12.8 (3.5)	4–20
Culpable victims	11.4 (3.8)	4–20
CATSO		
Social isolation	13.9 (4.2)	6–30
Capacity to change	25.1 (3.2)	6–30
Severity/Dangerousness	17.2 (4.4)	6–30
Deviancy	9.2 (2.5)	6–18
Outcome variable ATTSO		
Incapacitation	23.2 (6.9)	8–48
Ineffectiveness	14.5 (2.2)	4–24
Mandated treatment	14.9 (2.5)	3–18

Note. VCS = Victim Concern Scale; CATSO = Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders; ATTSO = Attitudes Toward Treatment of Sex Offenders.

Table 2 presents the statistically significant correlations among the study variables. Age and race were not significantly related to any subscale of the ATTSO and thus were excluded from the SEM analysis. Gender, political stance, having a family member who had been arrested, CATSO scores, and VCS scores were significantly related to one of the ATTSO subscales and thus were used in the SEM analysis.

First SEM was run to test the measurement model using maximum likelihood estimation. Schumacker and Lomax (2004) described a variety of model fit indexes including the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) that should be considered when concluding a model fit. Using the criteria described by Hu and Bentler (2000), a cutoff value close to .95 for CFI, .08 for SRMR, and .06 for RMSEA suggests a good fit between the model and the observed data. The measurement model fit indices are .96 for CFI, .06 for SRMR, and .06 for RMSEA; thus, the measurement model fits the data. All factor loadings on the latent construct are significant except for the dimension of severity/dangerousness on CATSO. It is possible that the other three dimensions (i.e., Social Isolation, Capacity to Change, and Deviance) of CATSO capture the characteristics of sex offenders, while severity/dangerousness taps the nature of the crime.

Second, SEM was run to test the hypothesized relations in the proposed model. Table 3 presents the results of path coefficients among the studied variables and the overall model fit indices. The model fit is acceptable, as $CFI = .95$, $SRMR = .07$, $RMSEA = .06$, and $\chi^2 = 124.08/59$ ($p < .05$). Specifically, VCS and CATSO are significant predictors of attitudes toward the

TABLE 2 Correlations among Studied Variables

Variable	ATTSO		
	Incapacitation	Ineffectiveness	Mandatory treatment
Gender	-.11*	.04	.09
Family member being arrested	.03	-.13*	.80
Political stance	-.12*	-.03	-.10
CATSO			
Social isolation	.25**	.01	-.13*
Capacity to change	-.01	-.17**	.38**
Severity/dangerousness	.83**	-.62**	.16**
Deviancy	.15**	.08	-.12*
VCS			
General concern	-.01	-.02	.18**
Violent crime victim	-.04	-.06	.28**
Theft victim	.01	.04	.13*
Culpable victim	-.17**	.15*	-.01

Note. ATTSO = Attitudes Toward Treatment of Sex Offenders; CATSO = Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders; VCS = Victim Concern Scale.

* $p < .05$ level (2-tailed). ** $p < .01$ level (2-tailed).

TABLE 3 Results of Structural Equation Modeling Analyses

Path	Standardized coefficients
Gender—CATSO	-.31*
Farrest—CATSO	.04
Pstance—CATSO	.05
VCS—CATSO	-.28*
VCS—ATTSO	-.06*
CATSO—ATTSO	.13*
Goodness-of-fit indexes	
χ^2 (63)	210.7 ($p < .05$)
CFI	.95
SRMR	.07
RMSEA	.06

Note. ATTSO = Attitudes Toward Treatment of Sex Offenders; CATSO = Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders; VCS = Victim Concern Scale; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

* $p < .05$ level.

treatment of sexual offenders. Those who showed higher levels of concern for victims tend to believe that sex offenders should be treated, that treatment was effective, and that mandated treatment is necessary. Those who showed less positive attitude toward sex offenders tend to believe that sex offenders should not be treated, that treatment was not effective, and that mandated treatment was not necessary. Only one demographic variable predicts ATTSO: Female students tend to have a less negative attitude toward sex offenders than do male students.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS TO FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

The first research question of this study was to address participant's attitudes toward sex offenders and their treatment through using two recently developed attitudinal measures—CATSO and ATTSO—which both demonstrated good internal consistency with this sample. The descriptive findings of this study reveal the complexity of individual attitudes toward sex offenders and specific attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders. Participants' attitudes toward sex offenders seem to fall into the positive category. Specifically, although sex offenders were perceived to be less likely to change, they were not, in general, perceived as loners, dangerous, or as a sexually occupied group. Although it seems that many participants remain doubtful about the effectiveness of treatment programs, on average, their attitudes toward sex offender treatment indicate that they agree that sex offenders should be treated and that mandated treatment is necessary, a finding consistent

with previous findings (Brown, 1999). Such apparently lenient attitudes toward sex offenders in this sample may be due to efforts in academia to promote a rational understanding of sex offenders. College students, a relatively well-educated group, may have more access to unbiased information from research evidence, and thereby may tend to have a less demonized view of sex offenders. We speculate that students might be limited in knowledge of sex offender treatment programs, and thus, remain suspicious about the effectiveness of sex offender treatment programs.

The second research question of this study addressed the significant relationship between the CATSO and the ATTSO. As expected, those who show more negative attitudes toward sex offenders are more likely to hold the belief that sex offenders should not be treated, that treatment is not effective, and that mandated treatment is not necessary. This finding validated our preliminary hypothesis that individual general attitudes toward a social group influence their specific beliefs or attitudes of treatment.

The levels of concern for victims were found to be related to both the CATSO and the ATTSO. Those who reported higher levels of concern for victims tended to have less stereotypical attitudes toward sex offenders. They tended to believe that sex offenders should be treated and that mandated treatment is necessary, but remained uncertain about the effectiveness of such treatment. These findings are consistent with what was found by Clements and his colleagues (2006). They asserted that those who endorse a rehabilitation orientation toward offenders express higher levels of concern for victim groups, and a high level of concern for victims does not preclude favor of rehabilitative goals for offenders.

Gender had a significant relationship with the CATSO. Females tended to show less negative attitudes toward sex offenders, a finding that is consistent with previous literature suggesting that women are more compassionate and protective (Haghighia & Lopez, 1998; Johnson, Hughes, & Ireland, 2007; Valliant, Furac, & Antonowicz, 1994). Individuals' political stance and their acquaintance with a family member who had been arrested did not statistically predict their attitude about sex offenders. The insignificance of these two variables could be limited to the college student population under study, and future research should aim to provide insight into these relationships by examining a diverse population.

The last research question of this study focused on whether the proposed model yielded a good fit for the data. The model fit index as discussed in the earlier Results section suggests that the conceptual model fits the data. In this case, the model can be further modified and tested on other populations. The researchers believe that both the CATSO and the ATTSO can be useful tools in the area of public policy so that current sex offender related policies can be made more scientifically and treatment-oriented. Convicted sex offenders are increasingly vulnerable due to recent policies that have become more restrictive and punitive (e.g., preventing sex offenders from

living near schools or parks; (Church et al., 2008). Policymakers and program developers should be informed about and remain sensitive to the public's sentimentality through scientific inquiry using validated assessment tools, and, consequently, make policies and programs that are congruent with public attitudes while not alienating convicted sexual offenders. Researchers in this area and practitioners who work with sex offenders need to pay more attention to the treatment outcomes for this population. Information needs to be distributed to the public in a timely and understandable manner to help form public attitudes that are based in science and not emotional reaction.

This study represents an initial effort to explore the relationship between general attitudes and treatment specific attitudes toward sex offenders among a sample of non-professionals (i.e., social workers, psychologists, police officers, etc.). A close connection between these two measures of attitudes indicates that findings from this study could serve as preliminary evidence on which to build future research into public attitudes toward sex offenders and treatments for them.

Although the effectiveness of sexual offender treatment has been supported by a number of studies (e.g., Abracen & Looman, 2005; Marshall & Barbaree, 1988; Marshall, Jones, Ward, Johnston, & Barbaree, 1991), the public opinions toward sex offenders are punitive due to the stereotype of sex offenders and strong emotion attached to sexual crime. Consequently, the legislation has a history of harshness toward sexual offenders in response to such a strong but skewed public opinion (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004).

The important goals of social work practice, whether with sex offenders or victims, are not only to change the stereotype of sex offenders and people's general attitudes toward them, but also to advocate for the appropriate treatment. These efforts may, in turn, promote more appropriate policy than containment and monitoring to prevent re-offenses. In a social work educational setting, it is important to increase our students' confidence in the effectiveness of evidence-based treatment programs. For example, social work students may be sympathetic toward sex offenders but remain discouraged to work with this group as a result of stereotypes or lack of knowledge surrounding successful treatment programs. Thus, the focus of social work education could be on forming an evidence-based attitude toward effectiveness of treatment programs, broadening their horizon by cultivating a professional attitude toward sex offenders and other criminal groups, and inspiring them to come up with novel treatment programs.

Beyond the classroom setting, the ATTSO and CATSO can be used among social work professionals or program developers. Knowledge of their attitudes toward this group would better prepare professionals to deliver appropriate and adequate services to this stigmatized population. Findings of this study convey a message for policymakers that it is essential to incorporate the public in changing restrictive and punitive policies, which are not the optimal solution in helping sex offenders to change. Promoting

treatment-oriented programs can avoid negative consequences for sex offenders as well as negative consequences for the public.

This study has several limitations. First, its nature of a cross-sectional design prevents the identification of a cause effect that is implied in the conceptual model. It is possible that individuals' general attitudes toward sex offenders influence their attitudes toward sex offender treatment, which in turn reinforce their general attitudes toward sex offenders. Future studies may clarify this issue by using a longitudinal study design to explore the dynamics of the two interrelated attitudes.

Second, participants were recruited from a public southern university. The student body primarily consists of individuals who come from the "Bible Belt" and have strong conservative beliefs. In addition, the sample is limited due to the inclusion of predominant groups who are young (93% below age 21), female (74.9%), and White (84.1%). For these reasons, they may not be representative of the university population in the United States, and the researchers do not intend to infer that this sample is representative either of a student population or of the general population. At present, the authors are seeking to address this limitation through replication studies using diverse community samples. Comparable findings will raise the level of confidence in the reliability and validity of the CATSO and improve its generalizability.

Finally, the predictive validity of the CATSO has not yet been fully addressed. Future studies need to examine relations between the CATSO scores and other indicators of public views about sex offenders (e.g., community policies and legislation) and attitudes toward other offenders and crime-related issues (e.g., punishment, due process, etc.; Church et al., 2008). It is important to incorporate an understanding of how attitudes toward sex offenders overlap or contrast with broader justice-related attitudes.

Steps to further establish the reliability and validity of the CATSO include additional replications evaluating its utility with other populations and possibly testing the instrument's sensitivity to attitude change as a function of educational interventions, dramatic community events (e.g., a sex offender moving into a community), or personal experiences with victimization (Church, Brannen, Baldwin, & Clements, 2009).

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