

6-11-2012

# The Simplicity and Complexity of Public Attitudes Toward Sex Crimes

Laura L. King  
*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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THE SIMPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES  
TOWARD SEX CRIMES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Laura L. King

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2012

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of Criminology

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Laura L. King

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

April 6, 2012                      Signature on file  
Jennifer J. Roberts, Ph.D.  
Professor of Criminology

April 6, 2012                      Signature on file  
Kathleen J. Hanrahan, Ph.D.  
Professor of Criminology

April 6, 2012                      Signature on file  
Dennis M. Giever, Ph.D.  
Professor of Criminology

April 6, 2012                      Signature on file  
Jennifer L. Gossett, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Criminology

ACCEPTED

Signature on file  
Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.  
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: The Simplicity and Complexity of Public Attitudes Toward Sex Crimes

Author: Laura L. King

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Jennifer J. Roberts

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Kathleen J. Hanrahan  
Dr. Dennis M. Giever  
Dr. Jennifer L. Gossett

Researchers have consistently found that public attitudes toward sex crimes are characterized by fear and an extreme degree of punitiveness. However, much of this research has assessed attitudes toward “sex offenders” rather than opinions toward different types of offenses and offenders. In fact, previous research on public opinion about crime has revealed that punitiveness tends to vary in accordance with the amount of information provided and the complexity of questions asked. Few have examined if public attitudes about sex crimes are similarly nuanced. As such, the main objective of this study was to examine general *and* specific attitudes toward sexual offenses and offenders, and to determine the factors that influenced these opinions.

A survey was sent to a sample of Pennsylvania residents to measure a variety of opinions related to crime, acceptance of traditional gender roles, and sexual offenses. In addition to the scales that were constructed to measure these general perceptions, the factorial survey method was used to create five unique sexual offense vignettes for each survey to examine the extent to which scenario characteristics (e.g., offender sex, victim age) affected the dependent variables of punitiveness, estimations of victim harm, and attitudes toward treatment amenability. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian’s (2009) *Tailored Design Method* was used as a guide for survey construction and implementation. Hierarchical linear modeling was employed to test the stated hypotheses.

The results suggested that attitudes toward sex crimes among this sample of Pennsylvania residents were both simple and complex. That is, while general attitudes toward sex offenders were found to be quite negative, the analyses revealed that specific details about the offense, offender, and victim had a significant effect on punitiveness, victim harm, and treatment amenability. In all models, offense type, offender sex, offender age, and victim age were significant in relation to the dependent variables. The implications of the findings are discussed, in addition to suggestions for future research and overall conclusions.