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# Ashamed and Alone: Comparing Offender and Family Member Experiences With the Sex Offender Registry

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## Abstract

Originally intended to decrease sexual victimization by increasing community awareness of convicted sex offenders, sex offender registration and notification laws have been shown to produce numerous unintended consequences for both registrants and their family members (FMs). In many cases, these unintended consequences may actually increase sexual reoffending risk by reducing offenders' informal social control and inhibiting successful postconviction reintegration. The current study examines two such consequences, shame and social isolation, using a sample of 109 registered sex offenders and 116 sex offender FMs ( $N = 225$ ). Although prior research has documented the existence of shame and social isolation within both populations, to date, there have been no systematic attempts to examine variation between groups. We found that the degree of social isolation and shame does significantly differ between registered sex offenders and their FMs, with registered sex offenders reporting higher levels of both social isolation and shame compared to FMs at the bivariate level. Using ordinary least squares regression analysis, we determined that attitudinal variables (disrespect and unfair sanctions) were the most salient predictors of participants' perceived intensity of social isolation and shame.

## Keywords

sex crimes, crime policy, quantitative methods

Feared, stigmatized, and stereotyped as criminals who abduct and rape children (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), convicted sex offenders face a variety of postconviction restrictions in the community including being listed on a sex offender registry and subjected to public notification of offender demographic information. These policies are intended to increase community awareness of sex offenders, thereby increasing the informal social controls applied to sex offenders in the community. For the past two decades, these laws have been steadily increasing in scope and number of

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requirements (Mancini, 2013). Expansions include increased minimum registration length, the inclusion of juvenile sex offenders on state registries, and making failure to register violations a felony offense (Adam Walsh Act, 2006). In addition to being perceived by registered sex offenders as a “double jeopardy” style punishment and violation of their constitutional rights (Durling, 2006), scholars have identified multiple unintended consequences, such as unemployment, housing issues, and harassment, that are experienced by sex offenders as well as sex offender family members (FMs) as a result of these legislative controls (Burchfield, 2012; Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

Besides being an unforeseen product of sex offender registration and notification (SORN) laws, some unintended consequences may actually produce a counterproductive increase in sex offender risk, most notably through the increased social isolation and shaming of sex offenders and sex offender FMs. Research suggests that social isolation increases sex offenders’ recidivism risk by reducing the quantity and quality of informal social bonds or controls between the registered sex offender and society (Hirschi, 1969; Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Social isolation of sex offender FMs may also increase recidivism risk, as scholars find isolation can impact a FM’s decision to leave or withdraw from a socially supportive relationship with their sex offender loved one (Bailey & Sample, 2017). Shaming of registrants and FMs may also contribute to increased recidivism risk. Braithwaite’s (1989) reintegrative shaming theory suggests that if offenders are not sufficiently accepted back into communities postconviction and are chronically vilified for their offenses, then recidivism becomes a likely occurrence. Scholars researching sex offender populations argue the severity of consequences associated with SORN laws creates such high levels of offender shame that it becomes disintegrative in nature (Klein, Rukus, & Zambrana, 2012). While the current study does not directly examine sex offender recidivism, we examine these earlier consequences (shame and social isolation) that may contribute to the reduction or the increase of sex offender recidivism risk.

Scholars have documented the existence of both shame and social isolation in registrant and FMs samples (Bailey & Sample, 2017; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009; Tolson & Klein, 2015), but to date there has been no systematic examination of how shame and social isolation vary within both populations. Although FMs may be experiencing “courtesy stigma” (Edwards & Hensley, 2001) similar to that of their sex offender loved ones, it is reasonable to expect that registrants and FMs have slightly different experiences due to differences in direct and indirect association with the sex offender registry. The current study intends to explore that hypothesis using a sample of 109 registered sex offenders and 116 sex offender FMs ( $N = 225$ ). We first compare the perceived intensity of social isolation and shame between sex offenders and sex offender FMs. We then use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to compare the impact of demographic, sex offense, and attitudinal variables on the perceived intensity of social isolation and shame in both groups. The results of this study can help social service agencies identify the individuals most at risk for physical and social isolation, in turn, helping to reduce sex offender risk by promoting strong social bonds and reintegrative shaming efforts.

## **Background**

The current study examines two consequences of SORN policies, shame, and social isolation. These consequences were chosen due to their impact on offenders’ recidivism risk, through social control theory, as well as offenders’ successful reintegration into the community postconviction, through reintegrative shaming theory.

### *Social Isolation and Social Control Theory*

Social control theory argues that prosocial bonds with FMs, friends, and other members of society helps offenders conform to social norms and reduce criminal offending (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson &

Laub, 1993). Originally derived from Hirschi's social bonding theory (1969), Sampson and Laub's expansion (1993) into social bonding over the life course incorporates the importance of formal and informal sources of social control. Formal bonds, such as those between offenders and supervision officers, law enforcement, and other government institutions, are often involuntary. In contrast, informal bonds, such as offenders' bonds with FMs, friends, and other acquaintances, are usually voluntary in nature. The importance of informal bonds in reducing criminal activity has been well-documented (Bersani, Laub, & Nieuwbeerta, 2009; Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Farrington & West, 1995; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Uggen, 2000) and evidence suggests that informal social bonds may provide more behavioral control than formal bonds (Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Previous research has also focused on the importance of community-based sex offender support groups that help to hold individuals accountable postconviction and aid in the decrease of social isolation (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007). As will be discussed further in the following section, the public dissemination of sex offender information required by SORN laws isolates sex offenders and their families. This isolation reduces the informal social bonds by weakening family ties and personal relationships, thereby reducing informal social control on offenders and increasing offenders' recidivism risk. While this study does not directly test social control theory, we discuss social isolation from a social control perspective. However, the primary purpose of the article is not theory testing.

### *Shame and Reintegrative Shaming Theory*

Braithwaite (1989) argued that there are two types of shaming, reintegrative and disintegrative. Reintegrative shaming is temporary, used to communicate censure on an individual, but ultimately aimed at correcting the offender's behavior and reintegrating him or her back into the community (Braithwaite, 1989). Disintegrative shaming, on the other hand, is a more permanent and reoccurring shame, resulting in a master status that encourages stigmatization and ultimately breaks the bond between the offender and the community (Braithwaite, 1989). In other words, the offender is permanently labeled as such and is not able to break free of that master status no matter what. Because of this, Braithwaite (1989) noted that disintegrative shaming techniques would increase crime because offenders would be pushed away from the lawful community. SORN laws apply a master status of "sex offender" to the registrant (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; ten Benschel & Sample, 2016), which exemplifies disintegrative shaming. In many states, including Texas, the use of lifetime registration for some sex offenses makes this master status become permanent. If an individual must live the remainder of his or her life as a sex offender, then there is never an opportunity to be accepted back into the community. The registrant will always be viewed as an outsider. This runs counterintuitive to the reintegrative shaming arguments made by Braithwaite (1989). The netwidening alterations in sex offender legislation (Lytle, 2015, 2016) continue to increase the number of individuals subject to public registration, thus potentially affecting the successful integration of more and more sex offenders with their families. We are not directly testing reintegrative shaming theory. Instead, the general concept of shame is derived from Braithwaite's arguments and focuses on the issue of ostracism related to shame.

### *SORN Laws*

SORN laws have proliferated across the United States. Originally, the passage of the Jacob Wetterling Act (1994) only required that sex offender information be available to law enforcement, but Megan's Law (1996) made community notification mandatory for all states. The Adam Walsh Act of 2006 continued the expansions of the previous two memorial laws, by providing for online public registries, increasing registration time requirements, and including juvenile sex offender

registration, among other policy changes (Mancini, 2013). Although the goal of registration and notification policies was to decrease rates of sexual victimization, particularly against juveniles (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), most researchers find little to no support for the efficacy of these policies (Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009; Huebner & Bynum, 2006; Prescott & Rockoff, 2011; Renzema & Mayo-Wilson, 2005). However, community members perceive sex offenders to be chronic recidivists who continuously pose a threat to the community (Lam, Mitchell, & Seto, 2010) even though studies find that sexual recidivism rates are less than 10% and vary by crime type (Sample & Bray, 2006). Due to this misperception, the public continues to provide strong support for harsh criminal sanctions including the increased use of SORN laws, lengthy registration periods, and expansive residency restrictions (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Mears, Mancini, Gertz, & Bratton, 2008). This support has led to a proliferation of sex offender legislation including laws that increase the number of offenders on sex offender registries as well as the number of crime types eligible for public registration (Lytle, 2016; Mancini, 2013). As these policies continue to expand in scope, so do the associated unintended consequences of such legislation. Despite strong community member support for SORN legislative efforts, research suggests that community members are often misinformed about sex offenders (Klein, 2015) and often do not access the registry tools they so strongly advocate for (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Burchfield, 2012; Craun, 2010; Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun, & Kernsmith, 2009).

### *Unintended Consequences of SORN Laws*

Researchers have documented a variety of unintended consequences for convicted sex offenders because of SORN policies. These unintended consequences are not directly mandated by the state but do result from the legal mandates of SORN laws (Love, Roberts, & Klingele, 2013). Findings suggest that registered sex offenders experience difficulties finding employment and housing and also report high levels of stress associated with being a registrant (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Klein et al., 2012; Klein, Tolson, & Collins, 2014a; Lasher & McGrath, 2012; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). These experiences have important consequences for sex offender risk. Research suggests that steady employment decreases recidivism risk (Hanson & Harris, 1998) and helps sex offenders maintain social support and ties to the community (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000). Steady employment also helps registered sex offenders maintain permanent housing, as the lack of these two items are two of the most important barriers sex offenders face in regard to successful reentry (Socia, Levenson, Ackerman, & Harris, 2015). Sex offender FMs are also potentially affected by these unintended consequences, depending on how closely the FMs are associated with their registrant loved one (Farkas & Miller, 2007). Scholars find that sex offender FMs experience similar unintended consequences of SORN laws including housing and employment difficulties, public harassment, and high levels of stress (Bailey & Sample, 2017; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009; Tolson & Klein, 2015).

Living under the formal label of "registered sex offender," registrants face the potential of being harassed, stigmatized, or of becoming victims of vigilantes. Sex offender registries publish public information about the offenders including their names, addresses, hair and eye color, type of crime committed, type of car driven, and in some cases even their shoe size (Mancini, 2013). Although registry websites do provide the appropriate legal disclaimers regarding the illegality of harassing or physically harming registered sex offenders, they do not always provide the necessary deterrence needed to prevent community members from taking on vigilante roles against registered sex offenders. Researchers report that registered sex offenders have experienced harassment, physical assault, property damage, public ridicule, and even community member attempts to make money from the sale of registration information (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Klein et al., 2012, 2014a, Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Zevitz, Crim, & Farkas, 2000).

*Social isolation.* Given the stigmatization of sex offenders in the community, SORN laws increase the social isolation of sex offender registrants and their families by making it difficult for registrants to create and/or maintain close relationships, thereby isolating them and reducing social support availability (Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Since informal bonds play an important role in reducing recidivism risk (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Sampson & Laub, 1993), social isolation of sex offenders actually reduces public safety by reducing the level of informal social control enacted upon offenders and therefore increasing offenders' recidivism risk. Social isolation of offenders may become even more pronounced because scholars have found that this isolation extends beyond offenders themselves. Even though they themselves have not been convicted of a sexual crime, sex offender FMs often experience a courtesy stigma (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007) or "contagious stigma" (Austin, 2004) because of their continued support of their sex offender loved one. The stress of this stigma strains family relationships and marriages (Bailey, 2017; Bailey & Sample, 2017), potentially leading to the severance of the sex offender–FM bond (Bailey & Sample, 2017; Reichle & Montada, 1994) and further weakening offenders' social support.

*Shame.* The stigmatization of sex offenders and their families can also increase recidivism risk by increasing disintegrative shame. Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory (1989) suggests that shaming offenders can reduce recidivism, but only if the offender is forgiven for the offense and is ultimately reintegrated back into the community. Disintegrative shaming efforts, on the other hand, work to humiliate or villainize the offender, while ostracizing the offender from the community. Under SORN laws, information about registered sex offenders may be disseminated to the community through town halls, flyers, street signs, and door-to-door notifications in addition to being listed on public websites. Research suggests that registered sex offenders often feel shame as a result of being required to register (Klein et al., 2012; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007), but it is likely that this shame reaches the level of disintegrative shaming given that public notification policies have been shown increase offender labeling and social harassment (Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

Braithwaite (1989) argued that when offenders are outcast through disintegrative means, they tend to isolate themselves away from those who are the source of the shaming. Scholars find evidence of these self-isolating behaviors; registered sex offenders who feel stigmatized and ostracized may break away from community norms and abandon any available social capital (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Tolson & Klein, 2015) and may even socially or physically disappear as a way to mitigate the shame they are experiencing (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999). Public identification and ostracism of registered sex offenders are therefore not conducive with reintegrative shaming efforts. Instead, SORN laws inhibit offenders' reintegration into society postconviction, thereby further removing them from group norms and increasing stress triggers relating to sexual recidivism (Petersilia, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005).

### *Current Study*

To date, much of the research on unintended consequences has focused on identifying the presence or absence of different registry experiences in various sex offender populations including female offenders (Klein et al., 2012, 2014a; Tewksbury, 2004), registered college students (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), and FMs of registrants (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). What has yet to be explored is how the perceived intensity of these unintended consequences vary within registrant and FM populations and what individual characteristics affect these variations. The current study intends to fill that gap by using a sample of both registered sex offenders and sex offender FMs to examine and compare their experiences with two emotional unintended consequences of the registry: social

isolation and shame. This is the first study to directly compare the experiences of each group based on their status as either a sex offender or the FM of a sex offender.

## Method

The current study used close-ended, self-report surveys from a sample of registered sex offenders and sex offender FMs ( $N = 225$ ). For this study, we had two research questions: (1) Does the perceived intensity of social isolation and shame differ significantly between registered sex offenders and sex offender FMs and (2) what individual-level characteristics create variation in the perceived intensity of shame and social isolation? We use  $t$  test and OLS regression to test our research questions. The predictive power of three types of individual characteristics were examined for both dependent variables: participant demographics, crime type, and attitudinal variables.

## Sample

A purposive sample of 225 participants (116 sex offender FMs; 109 registered sex offenders) was gathered for this research with the help of a Texas-based sex offender advocacy group. Sampling took place in two stages. First, a face-to-face solicitation was conducted at the advocacy group's 2016 annual conference. The authors had a presentation booth where conference attendees could request information about the study and complete paper surveys. This stage yielded 52 participants: 29 sex offenders and 23 FMs. After the conference, additional surveys were gathered through the use of an online version of the survey administered through Qualtrics and distributed via the advocacy group's listserv. That solicitation resulted in an additional 80 registrant and 93 FM participants, resulting in 225 total participants.

This sampling strategy affected the sample's representativeness and limited our ability to generalize to the larger sex offender population. However, working with a local advocacy group provided reassurance to potential participants that the survey research would not result in additional harassment to themselves and/or their FMs, a fear that is common among sex offender participants (Bailey & Sample, 2017). Nonrandom sampling was also appropriate in this study due to the use of sex offender FMs because there are no publicly available lists of spouses, children, parents, and other relatives of registered sex offenders that can be used to randomly sample the population (Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009).

## Data Collection

Each participant completed a close-ended, self-report survey that explored the experiences of the participant with SORN laws. Two surveys were used: one was oriented toward sex offender FMs and the other toward registered sex offenders. The language of the survey questions was altered dependent on the participant group, but otherwise the measures were identical to allow for comparison between FM and registrant groups. Survey questions measured demographic and sex offense data (e.g., type of crime, length of registration, etc.) as well as attitudinal variables relating to participant perceptions of SORN law consequences.

## Dependent Variables

The current study sought to predict the participants' experiences relating to two unintended consequences of the sex offender registry, social isolation and shame. Social isolation was a scaled variable ( $\alpha = .751$ ) consisting of 3 items: (1) "I feel that since (I have/my family member registrant has) been listed on the sex offender registry, I have been excluded from my community;" (2) "I feel that since (I have/my family member registrant has) been listed on the sex offender registry, my

family member(s) has been excluded from their community;" and (3) "I feel that my close relationships have suffered because (I am/my registrant family member is) listed on the sex offender registry." Responses were recorded for each item using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Using confirmatory factor analysis, all 3 items loaded onto the same component at a factor loading of .691 or higher. Respondent answers to all 3 items were averaged together, providing a social isolation score between 1 (*no social isolation*) and 4 (*high social isolation*).

The shame measurement was adapted from one used by Tewksbury (2005) in a study of collateral consequences associated with the Kentucky Sex Offender Registry.<sup>1</sup> Shame was measured using a single item that asked the following: "I feel ashamed that (I am/my family member is) on the sex offender registry." Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The wording of this measure was specifically chosen because this study meant to examine how participants felt postplacement on the registry. Some convicted sex offenders are not required to register, so a measure regarding shame associated with a sexual offense conviction was not appropriate.

### *Independent Variables*

Three categories of independent variables were gathered from each participant: demographic variables, sex offense variables, and attitudinal variables. A correlation matrix was used to identify multicollinearity between independent variables in the regression models. Only one variable combination, gender and sex offender/FM identification, had significant correlations above .70 suggesting a multicollinearity concern (Champion & Hartley, 2010). As a result, gender was excluded from all OLS regression models.  $\chi^2$  and  $t$  test analyses were used on all independent variables to determine significant demographic differences between the sex offender and sex offender FM samples. Table 1 provides characteristics of survey respondents in this research.

**Demographic variables.** Participants were asked about their demographic characteristics, which included their respondent identification (sex offender or FM), gender, race, employment status, income, and age. These demographic features were chosen to serve as control variables within the sample. Additionally, employment status and income were included because they are two of the more important factors in whether a registered sex offender will successfully reenter postconviction without recidivating (Klein et al., 2014a).

Within the sample, 47% of participants identified as convicted sex offenders, and 53% of participants identified as FMs of convicted sex offenders. Respondent characteristics that were significantly different between the two samples were gender ( $X^2 = 167.2, p \leq .001$ ), age ( $t = -4.187, p \leq .001$ ), household income of US\$0–50,000 ( $X^2 = 20.594, p \leq .001$ ), and household income of US\$50,001–100,000 ( $X^2 = 5.348, p \leq .001$ ). No registered female sex offenders participated in this study. The lack of female offenders is not surprising given the small percentage of female sex offenders and the difficulties that prior researchers have had in collecting female specific samples (Ackerman, Harris, Levenson, & Zgoba, 2011; Klein et al., 2012; Tewksbury, 2004). Although there were female participants in the study, all female participants identified as sex offender FMs, causing the high correlation between gender and participant status noted previously. In regard to age, FMs reported a higher average age compared to registrants ( $\bar{X} = 55.6; 48.5$  years). This was largely due to the large number of FMs who self-identified as being the parent of a registrant, which places them in an older age bracket. Our samples of sex offenders and FMs also differed significantly in terms of household income, with a higher percentage of registrants in the lower income levels compared to FMs. This is likely due to the employment challenges that researchers have documented in sex



**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics of Family Members (FMs) and Registered Sex Offenders (RSO).

Variable	Total (N = 225)	FM (N = 116)	RSO (N = 109)
Demographic variables	$\bar{X}$ (SD) / %	$\bar{X}$ (SD) / %	$\bar{X}$ (SD) / %
<b>Respondent identification</b>			
Convicted sex offender	48	0	100
Sex offender family member	52	100	0
Female	44***	86	0
White	88	89	86
<b>Employment status</b>			
Not working	30	37	23
Working part time	8	7	9
Working full time	62	57	67
<b>Household income</b>			
US\$0–50,000	42***	28	58
US\$50,001–100,000	37***	49	23
US\$100,001–150,000	10	10	9
US\$150,001–200,000	4	4	4
US\$200,001 and up	8	10	6
Age (years)	52.3 (13.0)***	55.6 (13.5)	48.5 (11.3)
<b>Sex offense variables</b>			
Years since conviction (years)	9.3 (2.6)***	8.6 (2.9)	10.1 (1.9)
<b>Conviction type</b>			
Contact offense	48	48	49
Virtual offense	19	20	19
Other/unknown offense	32	33	32
Lifetime registration	83	80	87
Subject to residency restrictions	60***	70	49
<b>Attitudinal variables</b>			
Feelings of disrespect	3.0 (0.9)***	2.7 (0.9)	3.2 (0.8)
Unfair sanction scale	3.6 (0.6)**	3.7 (0.6)	3.4 (0.6)

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

offender populations (Tewksbury, 2005). Both sample groups were primarily white, and a majority of respondents reported working full time.

*Sex offense variables.* Several variables were collected relating to the sexual offense conviction. Sex offense conviction type was categorized as contact, virtual, or other/unknown offense in accordance with previous research (Bailey & Sample, 2017; Sample & Bray, 2006). We included these variables as binary measures in our OLS models, excluding contact offenses as the reference category, to identify potential differences in community reaction toward contact and noncontact offenses that would affect the social isolation of registrants or their loved ones. Participants were also asked how many years had it been since the sex offense conviction, required registration length, and whether the registrant in the case was subject to residency restrictions. Years since conviction was chosen because individuals who have been living under SORN laws for longer periods of time may be better adjusted than those individuals who have been more recently convicted. Required registration length was chosen because individuals required to register for life may never experience dissipation of social isolation and shame from the registry. Respondents were given the choices of 0–10 years, 11–25 years, and lifetime registration on the survey, but this measure was collapsed into a binary lifetime registration measure (1 = *yes*; 2 = *no*) for purposes of our OLS models due to limited

responses in the 11- to 25-year category. Currently, Texas law requires either 10-year or lifetime registration for most sex offenses, so the 25-year registration lengths most likely come from registrants whose original conviction was in another state. Finally, residency restrictions provide a state-mandated form of physical isolation from different communities which increases the possibility that the registrant and their FMs experience the unintended consequences of social isolation and shame. The residency restrictions variable was a dichotomous measure indicating whether or not the offender was subject to residency restrictions (1 = *yes*; 2 = *no*).

The only sex offense variables that were significant between both sample groups were the number of years since conviction ( $t = 4.545, p \leq .001$ ), and whether or not the registrant was required to abide by residency restrictions ( $X^2 = 10.509, p \leq .001$ ). FMs, on average, reported a more recent conviction than sex offenders ( $\bar{X} = 8.6; 10.1$  years). This may be a result of the data collection method, as more recently convicted sex offenders may be unable to participate in local advocacy organizations due to incarceration or other supervision restrictions, or this may suggest that over time FMs' interest and engagement in advocacy work wanes more than that of the registrant themselves. A significantly higher percentage of the FM sample reported that their sex offender FM was subject to residency restrictions compared to the sample of sex offenders (70–49%). The two remaining sex offense variables were conviction type and lifetime registration. Forty-eight percent of participants reported that they personally had committed or their FM had committed a contact offense. Additionally, 83% of participants reported that they or their FM were required to register for life.

**Attitudinal variables.** Our survey examined two attitudinal predictor variables, feelings of disrespect and unfair sanctions. Prior research has suggested that when individuals feel targeted, and when formal measures have been taken to harshly or continuously sanction offenders, the likelihood for social isolation increases. Researchers have found that individuals who feel disrespected or who feel as though they are being treated unfairly may withdraw from even intimate relationships as a result of these experiences (Reichle & Montada, 1994).

The disrespect measure was adapted from prior research conducted on offender perceptions' of personalized treatment in relation to their registry status (Klein et al., 2014a). Disrespect was measured with the following question: "People do not treat me with respect once they find out that (I/my family member) am required to register as a sexual offender." Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Both groups felt disrespected, but registrants reported significantly more disrespect ( $t = 4.132, p \leq .001$ ) compared to FMs ( $\bar{X} = 3.2; 2.7$ ).

The unfair sanctions measure used 2 items adapted from previous research examining the effects of participant perceptions of unfair sanctions (Klein et al., 2014a; Tewksbury, 2005). Unfair sanctions was a scale variable ( $\alpha = .669$ ) consisting of 2 items: (1) "I feel like (I am/my family member is) being unfairly punished by being on the sex offender registry"<sup>2</sup> and (2) "The registry has unfairly classified (me/my family member) as a sex offender."<sup>3</sup> Responses were recorded for each item using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), then averaged together. Both groups perceived the sex offender registry to be very unfair, but FMs had a significantly higher perception of unfairness ( $t = -2.733, p \leq .01$ ) than registrants ( $\bar{X} = 3.7; 3.4$ ). These measures were operationalized in this format to examine the participants' perceptions of the sex offender registry, specifically whether or not they believed their placement to be a fair sanction. Although the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the sex offender registry is a civil measure and not a criminal sanction, many individuals still perceive it to be a punishment (Durling, 2006). These measures helped capture the feelings that public identification as a registered sex offender or registered sex offender FM create for participants as opposed to feelings related to the sex crime conviction itself, which may or may not result in registration with the state and public notification.

## Procedure

To test our research questions, we first used *t* tests to compare the perceived severity of social isolation and shame between registered sex offenders and sex offender FMs. We then used OLS regression to identify which independent variables significantly predicted variation in the social isolation and shame levels reported by respondents. One factor that may have influenced our results was the normality of our variables. We were unable to achieve normality with our attitudinal variables and two dependent variables, violating the normality assumptions of OLS regression analysis. Variable transformations were attempted to increase normality, but they were unable to achieve normality and did not influence the model outcomes. We believe that our sample size was sufficiently large to negate any substantial impact on the regression analysis, so the untransformed variables were used for the final analyses. However, we provide several recommendations in the Discussion section that may help avoid these normality issues in future research.

## Results

Our first research question was to identify whether there was a difference in perceived severity of social isolation and shame between registered sex offenders and sex offender FMs. Using *t* tests, we found that the average level of shame and social isolation differed significantly between both groups. Registered sex offenders reported a significantly higher level of social isolation ( $t = 2.514$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) than sex offender FMs ( $\bar{X} = 3.3$  and  $3.0$ , respectively). Registered sex offenders also reported a significantly higher level of shame ( $t = 5.800$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) than sex offender FMs ( $\bar{X} = 3.6$  and  $2.9$ , respectively). The results of the *t* test analysis are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Shame and Social Isolation Differences Between Family Members (FMs) and Registered Sex Offenders (RSO).

Variable	Total (N = 225)	FM (N = 116)	RSO (N = 109)
Dependent variables	$\bar{X}$ (SD)	$\bar{X}$ (SD)	$\bar{X}$ (SD)
Social isolation	3.1 (0.7)*	3.0 (0.7)	3.3 (0.7)
Shame	3.3 (1.0)***	2.9 (1.1)	3.6 (0.7)

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

To answer our second research question, OLS regression analysis was used to determine what characteristics predicted levels of social isolation and shame in both groups. A total of 47.2% of the variation in social isolation and 27.5% of the variation in shame was explained by the predictive models. Given the high  $R^2$  in the analyses, we conducted two stepwise analysis models to identify what variables were driving the high  $R^2$ . In both models, the addition of the attitudinal variables drove most of the change in variance. During the stepwise analysis, the  $R^2$  ranged from .059 to .472 for social isolation and .150 to .275 for shame. This indicates that attitudinal variables are the most important when discussing predictors of shame and social isolation. The model results are portrayed in Table 3.

### Social Isolation Model

In the first model, there were three significant predictors of social isolation: lifetime registration, feelings of disrespect, and unfair sanctions. Since lifetime registration was a dichotomous measure, being subjected to a lifetime registration period either directly (sex offender) or vicariously (FM) significantly

**Table 3.** Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models for Social Isolation and Shame.

Variable	Social Isolation ( <i>N</i> = 225)		Shame ( <i>N</i> = 225)	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Demographic predictors</b>				
Family member	−.062	.095	−.540***	.143
White	.066	.132	−.193	.198
Employment status	−.019	.052	.058	.079
Household income	.052	.036	.038	.054
Age	−.002	.004	.004	.005
<b>Sex offense predictors</b>				
Years since conviction	.002	.018	−.006	.025
Virtual conviction	−.116	.110	−.169	.164
Other conviction	−.055	.097	−.014	.144
Lifetime registration	.258*	.117	.236	.175
Subject to residency restrictions	.071	.089	.053	.134
<b>Attitudinal predictors</b>				
Feelings of disrespect	.481***	.051	.300***	.075
Unfair sanctions scale	.235***	.069	.286**	.104
Constant	.589	.597	1.693	.897
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.472		0.275	

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

increased the degree of social isolation experienced compared to those subjected to 25 years or less registration lengths ( $b = .258, p < .05$ ). One possible explanation is crime type and severity; lifetime registration is used for more serious crimes, including those involving minor children or repeat offenses, so it is possible that the lifetime registration variable captured the crime-type distinction present in social isolation. Feelings of disrespect also significantly increased social isolation ( $b = .481, p < .001$ ), as did perceptions of unfairness in regard to sanctioning ( $b = .235, p < .001$ ). None of the remaining demographic or sex offense variables were significant predictors of social isolation.

### Shame Model

In the second model, there were three significant predictors of shame: participant status as a sex offender FM, feelings of disrespect, and unfair sanctions. FMs of convicted sex offenders reported significantly less shame compared to convicted offenders themselves ( $b = -.540, p < .001$ ), suggesting that FMs experience less shame overall due to their indirect association with the sex offender registry. Like social isolation, feelings of disrespect and perceptions of unfairness significantly increased respondent shame ( $b = .300, p < .001$ ;  $b = .286, p < .01$ ). None of the remaining demographic or sex offense variables were significant predictors of shame.

### Discussion

Social isolation and shame of registered sex offenders and their FMs have been linked to sex offender recidivism. Social isolation of registrants themselves reduces the availability of informal bonds with prosocial individuals, and social isolation of sex offender FMs can lead to the severance of sex offender–FM bonds, further increasing the registrant's social isolation. By reducing the offenders' informal social control networks, both of these situations can increase offenders' recidivism risk (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Sampson & Laub, 1993). In a similar way, excessive shame from being associated with the registry or from having a loved one on the registry can lead to

disintegrative shame (Braithwaite, 1989), which hinders offenders' reintegration into society and increases stress triggers associated with recidivism (Petersilia, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005). Although prior research examines the existence of social isolation and shame as emotional unintended consequences of the sex offender registry (Bailey & Sample, 2017; Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tolson & Klein, 2015), to date, there have been no systematic examinations in the variation and predictors of these two consequences. The current study attempted to fill that gap by examining variations of social isolation and shame for registered sex offenders and their FMs. First, we examined whether the perceived intensity of social isolation and shame differed significantly between both groups. We found that the sex offender sample reported significantly higher levels of both social isolation and shame than the FM sample, suggesting that direct association with the sex offense conviction and SORN laws creates a stronger experience than indirect association through a loved one. We then examined which individual-level factors could help predict experiences of social isolation and shame. OLS regression models were used to determine the effects of significant predictor variables, including respondent demographic information, sex offense variables, and attitudinal variables, for both dependent variables. Overall, over 47% of the variation in social isolation, and 28% of the variation in shame, was explained by the predictor variables, although only three variables proved to be statistically significant in each model.

None of the demographic variables for social isolation were significant, which may indicate that individual characteristics such as age, race, and employment status do not influence the degree of social isolation experienced by sex offenders and their FMs. Although FM identification was not a significant predictor of social isolation, it was the only significant predictor of shame, indicating that both sex offender and FM groups experienced a similar degree of social isolation as reported in our survey, but sex offender populations experienced significantly higher levels of shame. The lack of significant demographics for social isolation suggest that simply being associated with the registry, even vicariously, may create social isolation for registrants and FMs alike.

The only significant sex offender predictor variable was lifetime registration, which was a significant predictor of social isolation. Our findings suggest sex offenders subjected to lifetime registration experience higher levels of social isolation, regardless of whether the individual is the offender themselves or a FM of the offender. None of the other sex offense predictors were significant for the shame model including crime type. Given the stereotype of sex offenders as hands-on, child predators (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), we expected that crime type would be a significant predictor of both shame and social isolation. The insignificance of this variable in both models suggests that the crime itself (virtual, hands-on contact, or other) does not impact the intensity of social isolation or shame. This finding may be a result of sex offender laws. Although scholars argue that the term sex offenders covers a large, heterogeneous group consisting of several different types of criminal activity and offender recidivism risk levels (Sample & Bray, 2006), most sex offender legislation is broad in nature, targeting all sexually based convictions regardless of individual characteristics. Thus, a 22-year-old engaged in what he or she believed to be a consensual sexual relationship with an underage teenager, who is legally unable to provide consent (statutory rape), is often subjected to the same postconviction requirements as a 30-year-old who forcibly rapes an adult female, thereby provoking a similar level of shame and social isolation. The findings of insignificance for crime type may also be due to our study design. Due to the limited size of our sample, we were unable to make a distinction within each crime type group, instead relying on the broader categories of contact offenses, virtual offenses, and other offenses. Thus, we were unable to differentiate between the two offenses described previously, which would both be classified as contact offenses. Future research that provides a more detailed examination of the offense characteristics may be able to identify more variation in unintended consequence experiences.

Both of the attitudinal variables, feelings of disrespect and unfair sanctions, were statistically significant in both models. Respondents who reported higher levels of disrespect because of their

association with the registry reported higher levels of social isolation and shame, as did respondents who reported feeling that the registry punishments for sex offenders were unfair. In both models, a stepwise analysis concluded that these two variables were responsible for a majority of the variance explained. This suggests that attitudinal variables may be of highest importance when predicting social isolation and shame, even beyond individual demographics and crime-type variables. The impact of these attitudinal factors on social isolation is particularly concerning due to the importance of social support during the rehabilitation, reintegration, and desistance processes of sex offenders (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000). Registered offenders who are unable to connect with others to maintain social support are at higher risk for reoffending, thereby reducing public safety. Social isolation of sex offender FMs may also impact public safety because FMs are an important source of social support for transitioning offenders. FMs who feel socially isolated may be unable to continue to support their sex offender loved one, thereby weakening the offender's support system and increasing offenders' recidivism risk (Bailey & Sample, 2017).

Prior research supports the idea of courtesy stigma (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farkas & Miller, 2007) or contagious stigma (Austin, 2004) that extends the stigma of sexual offenders to their non-registered FMs. The results from the first model suggest that the courtesy stigma experienced by sex offender FMs may be as socially isolating as the sex offense stigma experienced by the sex offenders themselves. This indicates that although SORN legislation was meant to only affect and control the behaviors of registered sex offenders, it is having an unintended impact on the FMs of sex offenders. In other words, there is a diffusion of legal sanctions effects onto innocent individuals who have not been convicted of any crimes. However, the generalizability of the current findings are limited by the nonrandom nature of the sampling technique and the inability to control for clustering, so it is unclear if this finding is valid for the larger population of sex offender FMs. Furthermore, these FMs were invited to complete the survey because they were members of a sex offender advocacy group. FMs who join an advocacy group may do so in an attempt to find a community of support because they are already feeling socially isolated, thereby affecting the high levels of social isolation in the current sample. Alternatively, these individuals could already be feeling less isolated because they have the social capital necessary to reach out and find a group to connect with and that can help them cope with the experiences involved with having a registered loved one. Future research that examines FM and sex offender populations simultaneously would be able to determine whether this finding is replicable.

The results of this study suggest that in order to improve the social connection of registrants and their FMs, we should focus our efforts on changing the experiences of both groups associated with the registry. Changes to sex offender legislation would be one way to achieve this by producing an attitudinal change toward registrants and their families. Feelings of disrespect are likely affected by the public nature of SORN policies in the United States. Researchers find that the public dissemination of sex offender information has resulted in offender/FM harassment, loss of employment, and unstable housing situations among other effects (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Klein et al., 2012, 2014a; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Zevitz et al., 2000). By reducing the number of offenders publicly listed on sex offender registries, or altering the type of information that is publicly available through community notification efforts, we may be able to reduce feelings of disrespect within sex offender and FM populations, thereby reducing social isolation and shame. If these legislative reforms were accompanied by town hall meetings or other community input venues, where registrants and their FMs could provide input about their experiences, this may also give a voice to those affected by these policies in the decision-making process and decrease the perception of unfairness.

### *Future Research*

The current study is one of the first that conducts a direct comparison of the experiences of sex offender FMs to those of registered offenders. Our findings suggest that, while there are many

commonalities between the two groups, more research is needed to examine how each population varies from one another. One of the primary limitations of the current study was the lack of dyads, meaning that sex offenders were not paired directly with members of their family during the analysis. This limited our ability to validate the perceptual data included in our survey. As we were not able to control for clustering, it is possible that the experiences of both the registrants and the FMs are similar in nature, thus resulting in Type I error for this study. Future research would benefit from a dyad study to see whether the perceived intensity of unintended consequences is similar within each dyad or whether one member of the dyad experiences more social isolation and shame than the other. Dyad research would also allow for the triangulation of perceptual data. For instance, it may be that offenders perceive that their FMs are at a higher disadvantage than their FMs actually experience and vice versa. Future research focused on FM–offender dyads would be able to compare the consistency of perceptual data with actual experiences.

Future research could also benefit from a change in sampling design. The use of an advocacy group to assist with data collection created selection bias, as it is likely that those individuals who are members of a sex offender advocacy group are different than those offenders and FMs who do not participate in advocacy related activities. We also relied heavily on the Internet during data collection, which limited our ability to reach offenders who are under Internet restrictions. Our sample consisted primarily of white males in heterosexual relationships with white females or who were the children of white females, which is consistent with the majority of registered sex offenders (Ackerman et al., 2011). However, future research should attempt to gather a more diverse population, as the experiences of female, minority, and homosexual offenders and FMs may differ from those of their counterparts. As these are populations that are more difficult to access, a change in methodological approach may be needed. Previous research has had success in collecting data from female sex offenders through the use of targeted mail out surveys (Klein et al., 2014a, 2014b).

In the current study, we were unable to achieve normality with the attitudinal variables and with the two dependent variables, violating normality assumptions of OLS regressions. We believe this violation stemmed in part from our use of a 4-point Likert-type scale with each of the measures, which limited the variability within the responses. Future research would also benefit from measuring these items on a 7- or 9-point Likert-type scale that includes a neutral response option, allowing for more variation in responses. Use of probability sampling techniques would also promote normality in the sample findings.

## **Conclusion**

This article sought to identify factors that would predict social isolation and shame among registered sex offenders and their FMs. Our results contribute to the limited body of research on sex offender loved ones by directly comparing the experiences of both groups for the first time. We acknowledge that while our results may not be generalizable in nature, this article expands on what we know about the FMs of sex offenders. This group of individuals supports their registered loved ones but unfortunately cannot escape the stigma that is associated with the sex offender registry. Our results show that sex offenders and sex offender FMs vary in terms of the intensity of the social isolation and shame, but the consequences do exist for both groups. In our analysis, the primary drivers of variation in social support and shame experiences were attitudinal variables, suggesting that how an individual feels about sex offender legislation is equally or potentially even more important than the legislation's practical impact on their lives. Given the consequences that shame and social isolation of offenders and/or FMs have on sex offender recidivism risk, it may be time to focus our attentions on legislative reform.

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## Notes

1. The original measure from the Tewksbury (2005) study stated, "I feel ashamed that I am on the Kentucky Sex Offender Registry."
2. This measure was adapted from the original Tewksbury (2005) measure which stated, "I feel I am being unfairly punished by being on the Sex Offender Registry."
3. This measure was adapted from the original Klein, Tolson, and Collins (2014a) measure which stated, "I feel that the Florida Sex Offender Registry has unfairly characterized me as a sex offender."

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