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## Perceptions of Sex Educators: A Qualitative Analysis

Christina Richardson

*Southern Oregon University*, richardc3@sou.edu

Hena Mustafa

*Southern Oregon University*, henaomustafa@gmail.com

Shanell K. Sanchez, PhD

*Southern Oregon University*, sanchezs2@sou.edu

### Abstract

The fear of children getting victimized by strangers is the basis for several current pieces of legislation, specifically Megan's law, despite the lack of corresponding empirical data. This legislation causes significant negative consequences for those who are on the registry, especially for juvenile offenders as they have unique challenges they face regarding labeling and societal reintegration. As most juveniles receive most of their sex education in school, and a lack sex education is a contributing factor to the commission of sex offenses, this study aims to explore a proactive method of preventing sex offenses. This study includes exploratory interviews with sex education teachers to highlight the critical gap between training for sex education and teaching sex education, and the difference between teaching sex education and knowledge about sex offenses. This study opens the dialogue regarding these connections and calls for proactive thinking in preventing juvenile sex offenses.

### Keywords

sex education, juveniles, sex offenses, criminology

### Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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Over two decades ago, seven-year-old Megan Kanka was raped and murdered by her neighbor. Unbeknownst to Megan's family, the murderer was as a twice-convicted child sex offender. Due to the public's fear of crime, New Jersey passed Megan's Law, which requires community notification of sex offenders. The federalization of community notification laws in 1996 inspired all fifty states and the District of Columbia to enact a version of community registration and notification laws, collectively referred to as "Megan's Laws" (Presser and Gunnison, 1999; Presser and Gunnison, 1999; Zevitz and Farkas, 2000). Notification laws involve the mandated requirement for juvenile sex offenders to register in forty-two states, with some states requiring registration requirements for life (Cochrane and Kennedy, 2010).

Though this legislation was intended to reduce public fear of sex crimes, the registries do little to minimize the risk of victimization or offending and are costly (Levenson, D'amora, and Hern, 2007; Livio, 2009). Research shows that Megan's Law is ineffective in decreasing recidivism of convicted sex offenders, and has little to no deterrent effect on future offending (Sandler, Freeman, and Socia, 2008; Schram and Milloy, 1995; Zgoba, 2004; Zgoba, Jennings, and Salerno, 2018; Zgoba, Witt, Dalessandro, and Veysey, 2008). There is also minimal evidence of a decrease in sexual offending as a result of this legislation, and no difference between recidivism rates pre- and post-enactment (Duwe and Donnay, 2008; Freeman, 2012; Livio, 2009). The Bureau of Justice estimates 34.2% of sexual offenses committed against youth were by a family member, and 58.7% were by an acquaintance rather than a stranger as the registry presumes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). As Megan's Law remains the prominent effort to reduce sex offenses despite its ineffectiveness, this study argues for further research into a preventative way of looking at sex offenses.

As one of the most significant contributors to recidivism is thought to be poor societal reintegration, the community

shaming associated with the registry further nullifies its intended purpose (Tewksbury, 2005; Zgoba, Witt, Dalessandro, and Veysey, 2008). Specifically, juveniles are more vulnerable to negative consequences of community shaming, including being harassed, excluded, bullied, physically and emotionally, and ostracized (Cochrane and Kennedy, 2010; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz and Farkas, 2000). This vulnerability is unwarranted as juveniles' likelihood of offending is almost identical to that of adult offenders (Fanniff, Schubert, Mulvey, Iselin, and Piquero, 2016; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2009; Prentky, Harris, Frizzell, and Righthand, 2000). This discrepancy exemplifies the need to understand juvenile sex and address this concern proactively.

Understanding the acceptance of registries despite their lack of effectiveness and increased stigmatization is critical as it is the only real effort to reduce sex crimes. This study offers a new approach to reducing sex crimes from a preventative rather than retroactive lens. We focus on juveniles in this study due to their increased vulnerability to the negative consequences of the registry, finding that juveniles often harm other minors (Cochrane and Kennedy, 2010; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz and Farkas, 2000), and Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Chaffin's (2009). Our research focuses on youth sex education, as Ford and Linney (1995) found that juvenile offenders receive most of their sex education from school. Our study to pilot future research into the potential for sex education to reduce juvenile sex offenses.

## **Background**

***Sex education for juveniles.*** A significant challenge for juvenile sex offenders is a lack of sex education in both the number of sources and availability of information. Most juveniles who would be considered violent sexual offenders reported having received all their information about sex from school only, and only a small percentage of youth, in general, receive information about sex from their

parents or siblings (Ford and Linney, 1995; Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, and Boonstra, 2016). Beginning in 1982, the United States (US) federal government provided two billion dollars-worth of funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs, limiting education about sex, consent, and sexual offenses (Funding Table, 2018). Though sex education had varied widely across the United States since then, there is a decline in formal sex education to adolescents (Hall, Sales, Komro, and Santelli, 2016; Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, and Boonstra, 2016). These factors prove significant challenges to improving the quality and quantity of sex education adolescents receive.

### ***Sex education with sex offender treatment.***

The challenges facing sex education are reinforced by convicted sex offenders' belief that there is a lack of sex education, and that sex education should expand past the classroom setting. Langevin, Wright, and Handy (1988) found that, though individual psychotherapy was the most endorsed treatment among sex offenders, social skills training, anger management training, and sex education were among the treatments offenders felt were important. Specifically, Millo (1994) found that 49% of juvenile sex offenders needed sex and health education, along with services related to academic education, anger management, and interpersonal relationships. In addition to a general lack of knowledge, Charman and Clare (1992) found that some offenders hold inappropriate and conflicting beliefs regarding the laws and social rules relating to sexual behavior, showcasing the necessity of comprehensive sex education.

Despite sex education utilization in sex offender treatment, there is a lack of research examining the potential of sex education to help reduce initial offending specifically with juveniles. Though research shows a lack of sex education among sex offenders, the literature lacks research that delves into proactively changing this or investigating these dynamics

(Charman and Clare, 1992; Milloy, 1994). Exploring the intersection between juvenile sex education and initial offending is necessary to create effective youth sex education and proactive reintegration programs for juveniles convicted of sex offenses. As such, we examined the connection between education, both regarding teaching standards and interaction with students, and knowledge of juvenile sex offending among sex educators.

## **Methods**

Data for this study comes from in-depth interviews conducted with middle and high school sex education teachers working in the Pacific Northwest region of the US. Educators in this region were selected because they are expected to provide robust sex education by the state and community, as well as proximity convenience. Respondents were asked to share their experiences teaching sex education.

Participants are referred to as sex education teachers in order to align with how they identify as well as how state policy identifies their professional role. They work in a state that is anecdotally said to lead the nation on sex education policies and requires accurate, not fear or shame-based, education. All educators were responsible for educating adolescents on sexuality, sexual health, and sexual responsibility. Each district decides who teaches the curriculum, whether that be a doctor, outside sex education educator, or the school's Physical Education (PE) teacher.

***Participants and sampling.*** Due to the mid-size geographical region, purposive convenience sampling with snowball techniques was used to locate participants (Drever, 1995). All interviews occurred between October 2016 and November 2017. Additionally, given that this region is relatively small, and there are only seventeen sex educators, the sample included interviews with ten educators: eight females and two males. Nine out of ten worked a local school district and one worked out of their home. Eight out

of the ten had been working in this position for over five years.

**Procedure.** The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The interviews were conducted by the third author individually, usually at the participants' workplace, and lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. We tape-recorded each interview with the participants' permission. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for rich qualitative narratives, to probe freely, and change the order in which questions got asked (Fielding, 1993). The interview guide focused on three topics: individual training, student interaction, and opinions and experiences teaching sex education. The interviewer encouraged the teachers to share their experiences, to express their views and opinions, and to share any concerns they might have about the current sex education system about juveniles and potential juvenile sex offenses. Upon verbatim transcription, all audio recordings of interviews and any identifying data were discarded.

**Data analysis.** We used a general inductive approach for the analysis of qualitative evaluation data. Respondents' statements about training, student interaction, and experiences teaching sex education were open coded for recurring themes and patterns (Richards and Morse, 2007). We read transcribed interviews multiple times, and on different occasions, to absorb rich details to best capture the articulation offered by our sample (Agar, 1996; Sanchez and Kasselstrand, 2017). Throughout coding, notes were kept for recurring patterns, consistent themes, common rhetoric, and shared stories. Stake (2005) explains that a mixture of description, interpretation, feelings, and opinions are needed to understand experiences fully.

## Results

The findings of this exploratory study help illuminate sex educators' challenges in

providing quality sex education due to training constraints, as well as highlight the value each educator placed on education, explicitly to teach consent and prevent unwanted sexual acts or crimes. We focus attention on the teachers' training and perspectives on education in the following themes: "Training Challenges" and "Education Helps."

**Training challenges.** Sex educators serve an essential role in schools throughout the country, especially since only a small percentage of youth in general receive information about sex from their parents or siblings (Ford and Linney, 1995; Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, and Boonstra, 2016). The push toward abstinence-only education creates further challenges in understanding and exploring consent and safe sex (Funding Table, 2018). The sex educators in this study were unique in that they supported teaching beyond abstinence by providing discussions on consent and answering questions for students on most issues. All sex educators discussed professional challenges facing sex education training. Throughout the interviews, no clear definition of the required training that emerged. Instead, participants discussed how their role broadened as they teach about multiple health issues and how their training is often a reflection of what trainings they choose to take and when. One educator stated, "we need to get recertified every five years, but the training takes place every year."

Despite a consensus as to the requirements for being an educator in their state, it is inconsistent as to what qualifies one to teach sex education. As stated by one educator, "it is not a specific like every three years you must do this or retake a class, it is more like a quota, get certain hours in on these topics, and you are good to go." All the teachers have various roles as health educators, and they are responsible for helping educate youth in their districts about issues that they will undoubtedly encounter. One educator stated,

I think there is so much improvement that we could do. We are doing a pretty good job, but we also have time constraints, and we have all of the other topics that we are teaching. We have had overdoses at the high school, we have had kids die. I mean we have kids with sexual assault, but then we also have this happening, and it is like how do we cover all of this pertinent information in a semester?

All the educators discussed that they applied for a teaching license that required one hundred hours of professional development. Educators were able to select their training based on personal preference: “you choose between going to sex education or going to a yoga and wellness class.” Health education encompasses more than just sexuality; additional topics include drug use and nutrition, making training inconsistent.

It would be nice to have more of a connection where we could do professional development with the university, and we could have a half-day where we could go spend time with the sexual assault groups at talking to us about ways to improve our curriculum around that area.

While all educators talked about the importance of sex education, it was evident that some had more specific training geared towards sex education than others.

Regardless of challenges, all educators reported a sense of support by parents, colleagues, and the community. Seven of the ten interviewed believed they had sufficient resources and support to educate their students best, specifically community support. One stated, “I feel supported by my colleagues. We spend much time working together to create these lesson plans.” It was apparent that, for the educators in this study, sex education is something that should be discussed and supported in order to be successful. One educator described her experience:

I feel incredibly comfortable, and I have autonomy within the state’s standards to work with my colleagues to bring the most critical and relevant information that we can to students. I think to have a unit on sexual assault and gender violence, and bringing in members of the community, and having awareness programs, having a day where students are wearing a ‘Got Consent?’ t-shirt is cool. I am excited by the conversations that are taking place and the awareness that students at this school have expressed.

As it was apparent that there were so many areas health educators must receive training on, they may benefit from being required to have yearly sex education training through available community resources, such as the local university.

Participants continued to emphasize that sex education is very important, but their job is demanding in various areas. All the educators felt they are educated on issues that can contribute to reducing sexual assault such as consent, safe sex practices, acceptance of sexual orientations and identities, and mandatory reporting.

***Education helps.*** When asked about the importance of educating youth on sex and sexuality, all the participants felt that education makes a difference and helps youth. Participants recognized that children are curious, misinformed, and willing to learn about topics some adults may be hesitant to discuss, such as sex. One educator said,

education is the cornerstone of behavior. We spend long periods with these kids, and this has to be a space in which the lessons for the rest of their lives get introduced.

In response to discussing difficult topics with students, an educator said,

I love them and do not think topics should be shielded away from because they will be talking about it whether or not I give it space in the classroom.

Though they were all willing to talk about things youth may not want to ask parents, participants emphasized that the type of education is just as important as education itself. For example,

If you think about schools that do teach abstinence-only, they have more teenage pregnancies and STDs. So, schools who do not teach about consent and respect may see more rapes and assaults.

Such statements are supported by current research (Funding Table, 2018; Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, and Boonstra, 2016).

Despite the consensus that education makes a difference, most of the educators felt “it is not the end-all-be-all.” Educators believed that what kids learn in the classroom is not all they are going to learn about sex. One educator stated

They have family, peer, and media influence. We contribute, sure, definitely, but the pressure that we determine or significantly can alter the number of sex offenses seems idealistic, but ultimately not that true.

Educators recognized that sex needs to get talked about more. One teacher stated,

It needs to get talked about in more places and more positive light; not all scare tactics. No fear. That is why I teach outside of the school because they need these lessons in school, but they also need them after school. The more they hear it, the longer the conversation extends.

The need to discuss sex more extends to educating youth on sex crimes and laws. Only one of the ten educators were able to identify

specifics within Megan’s Law, and none of the educators taught their students about it.

Further, most of the educators expressed that they had never considered talking about crime and laws in sex education. One educator describes her thoughts:

I think that when a person is in a place where they can have a conversation, it can go a long way in helping people understand what is going and how to avoid those situations, as a perpetrator, not as a victim. For instance, the simple conversation of talking about consent is fantastic. If we look back to high school experiences ten years ago, there was no talk about consent until college, until I was a master’s student, I did not talk about consent.

The teachers argued that minimizing victimization integrating sex education could help:

I feel like the more it is talked about and pointed out as a problem, it is going to benefit all of us. I also feel like that is much pressure to put education on educators.

When asked about situations that may arise related to juvenile sex offending, all the educators stated that they had never thought about that. All of them thought it was great to help reduce recidivism, however, and expressed concerns that youth may commit sex offenses because of a lack of knowledge. One educator explains:

I would say adult sex offenders are more likely to re-offend, which is why we have to track them more closely. However, kids are clumsy, unsure, and continuously learning through making mistakes, so I would not say a crime they committed sexually or otherwise is necessarily going to define whether or not they will repeat that behavior in the future as adults. I do not think a kid who makes a mistake like that when

they are young is more likely to do it again.

While the belief that education will make a difference was widespread with all educators, not much thought was given about discussing juvenile sex offense crimes. All the educators thought sex education could help youth because they often “just do not know something is not ok” and “consent is confusing when they are young.”

There have been numerous recent complaints regarding the current sex education system in the US, such as issues ranging from abstinence-only programs to needing more comprehensive lessons on consent, to how to talk to kids about various issues (Hall, Sales, Komro, and Santelli, 2016). The educators in this study felt able and supported to discuss any topic openly, however. While it was recognized that teaching youth about juvenile sex offenses could help educate youth, none had ever done so or ever been trained to do so.

## Conclusion

This research creates a discussion surrounding the necessity of having a stronger sex education curriculum in middle schools and high schools specifically because it might positively influence adolescent involvement in sex offenses. As research shows a lack of sex education about sex offenses and among sex offenders, our study focuses on looking at this concern from a proactive approach (Charman and Clare, 1992; Milloy, 1994). The incorporation of sex educators into the discussion allowed us to look at the state of sex education, a critical element as most juveniles receive their sex education in a school setting (Ford and Linney, 1995). This study highlights how sex education varies significantly among schools due to training standards, even within school districts. Also, this study shows that though sex educators agree that sex education may help reduce recidivism and sex crimes may occur because of the lack of knowledge, they have not considered talking about sex crimes in their courses. It is important to note that none

of the educators taught students about Megan’s Law, community notification, and registration legislation, as most of the educators were unaware of this legislation themselves.

We hope this study creates a discussion examining the disconnect between teaching sex education and understanding sex crimes. While the link between sex education and the likelihood of committing an offense has yet to be made, working on improving sex education is endorsed by sex educators. Further research on this topic is critical due to the potential to reduce juvenile sex offenses, a factor that is upheld by the negative repercussions the registry has on juveniles committed of sex offenses (Cochrane and Kennedy, 2010; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz and Farkas, 2000). We recommend future research in examining sex education policy changes, and if there is an influence on convicted juveniles. There currently is no research that makes the connection between education reform and the prevention of youth involvement in sexual offenses.

Moreover, there are no existing studies on enacting a proactive model of preventing adolescents from committing sex crimes. This study suggests that there is potential for creating a proactive model by bridging the gap between comprehensive sex education and discussion involving sex crimes. As such, additional research and investment in this topic can lend way to policy changes in the current state of sex education. We hope this study helps open the dialogue needed to make these potential changes by including those who know most about juvenile sex education.

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