

Female Prisoner Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (F-PATSO): A Preliminary Comparison Using the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO-R) Scale



N. A. Weihe: McNair Scholar

Dr. Andrew Giacomazzi: Mentor

Criminal Justice and Sociology

Abstract

This preliminary report explores female prisoner attitudes toward sex offenders (F-PATSO) held by incarcerated women at a medium security, state correctional facility. Utilizing the 18-question Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offender (CATSO-R) scale (Church, 2008) and eight demographic variables, researchers distributed self-administered surveys to 102 female inmates over the course of two days. For the purpose of this paper, and in order to determine if there is any variation in attitudes between groups, the author examines the prevalence of lifetime sexual abuse as reported by the inmates in relation to their attitudes toward sex offenders based on one of four factored areas from the CATSO-R instrument: Capacity to Change. Researchers of the F-PATSO study hypothesized that prisoner attitudes would likely mirror the measured attitudes of professionals and others who work with, and have personal experience with, sex offenders. In particular, the attitudes of the F-PATSO participants were compared to the attitudes of probation and community corrections workers in Montana, who were recently surveyed using the CATSO-R scale.

Introduction

In 1999, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported that 39% of female inmates in state prisons had been sexually abused before incarceration and over 25% had been sexually abused before the age of 18. Although this data is over a decade old, it is the most recent government data available on the incidence of lifetime sexual victimization of female prisoners and points to an ongoing need by government to study this disturbing and obdurate social issue. This particular BJS report showed a strong association between violent crime and a life history of both physical and sexual abuse. Given that many prisoners have been sexually abused or sexually assaulted in their lifetime, and given that they are required to live in close proximity to sex offenders while incarcerated, it is important to study prisoners' attitudes toward them. The preliminary results of the F-PATSO study indicate that 78% of female participants incarcerated at the Idaho State Pocatello Women's Correctional Center experienced sexual abuse or sexual assault in their lifetime. These numbers far exceed the government's 1999 report, and they might illustrate the progress made by public educators and policy makers to educate the citizenry about what constitutes sexual assault and sexual abuse. The fact that sex crimes go largely unreported is a well-known fact in law enforcement (USDOJ/OVW, 2010).

Prior to the F-PATSO research reported here, only community members living outside prison walls have been studied concerning attitudes toward sex offenders using the CATSO-R scale. The social significance of studying prisoner attitudes is important not only for the educational purposes of prison officials and researchers, but also for uncovering and understanding the way inmates feel about the social phenomenon which impacts their lives, and including their voices in the ongoing conversation about sex offenders—particularly because so many of them have been victimized by sex offenders—has far reaching implications for the whole of society. If, as the BJS suggests, there is a connection between violent crime and either childhood or lifetime sexual and/or physical abuse, and if the desire to affect positive change in the realm of corrections is legitimate, then researchers and criminal justice policy makers must listen to the people who have been subjected to lives that set them up for incarceration.

Studies suggest that people who have close working relationships with sex offenders such as counselors and probation officers possess more positive attitudes toward them than police officers and correctional officers, who have more limited interactions with them (Hogue, 1993; Lea et al., 1999). In addition, work done in 2006 by Ferguson and Ireland using the Attitudes Toward Sex Offender scale found victims of sexual abuse and/or people

who know someone who has been sexually abused also hold more positive attitudes toward sex offenders. This combined research suggests that people who have direct experiences with sex offenders or their victims may hold less stereotypical ideas and misconceptions about them. The questions for this report ask: *Do female prisoners who have been sexually abused or sexually assaulted have attitudes toward sex offenders that differ from those who do not report prior sexual abuse or assault? Are female prisoners similar to probation and community correction workers, in regard to attitudes that show sex offenders are amenable to changing their behavior?* The hypothesis suggests both that prisoner attitudes, regardless of lifetime abuse, will be similar due to the fact that each population has either direct experience with sex offenders or tangential experience with those who have been victims of sexual abuse and/or assault, and that prisoner attitudes will be similar to the attitudes of professionals who work with sex offenders, attitudes that have been shown to be less stereotypical and more favorable.

Methodology

The data collection for this study took place at Pocatello Women’s Correctional Center (PWCC) located in eastern Idaho. This prison houses approximately 289 women from a variety of custody levels: minimum; medium; close; community; “timers;” administrative segregation (“ad seg”); and riders. A flyer was posted one week prior to researchers’ arrival to inform the inmates of the pending study. The random sample was performed by prison IT. They put together a list of 150 prisoners for the survey. It was assumed that all prisoners would be called out and assembled in a room, the informed consent along with a description of the research would be read, and then inmates would decide whether they would take the survey or not. This was not the case; instead, prisoners were given the choice by prison officials to opt out of the process before hearing about the specifics of the study. Based on this unknown turn of events, and in order to boost survey return results, researchers added voluntary participation as an option. Several inmates not included on the list wanted to take the survey, so it was determined by prison officials and researchers that they could participate, which raised participation to 69%. It is the feeling of the researchers that prisoners who volunteered to take the survey did so out of boredom, and because the CATSO-R instrument quantitatively measures stereotypical ideas using a Likert scale, it is doubtful the information gleaned skewed the results of the CATSO-R portion of the study in any way. On the other hand, given the high rate of lifetime sexual assault or abuse reported by the prisoners, which was much higher than 1999 reports by the government, the voluntary participants may have been more inclined to take the survey as a way to testify about their abuse.

For this preliminary report, we are looking at the dependent variable defined as inmate attitudes toward sex offender’s capacity to change, delineated as Factor 2 on the CATSO-R scale, which includes five of the 18 items in the questionnaire (questions 1, 2, 11, 12, and 18). The following charts show the frequency results for all 102 surveyed female prisoners.

Dependent Variables

Tables 1-5. Frequency Results for CATSO-R Questions 1, 2, 11, 12, and 18

1. With support and therapy, someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior.

Table 1. CATSO 1

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Missing	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Strongly Disagree	17	16.7	16.7	17.6
Disagree	16	15.7	15.7	33.3

Probably Disagree	21	20.6	20.6	53.9
Probably Agree	27	26.5	26.5	80.4
Agree	14	13.7	13.7	94.1
Strongly Agree	6	5.9	5.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

2. People who commit sex offenses should lose their civil rights (e.g. voting and privacy).

Table 2. CATSO 2

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Missing	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Strongly Disagree	7	6.9	6.9	7.8
Disagree	11	10.8	10.8	18.6
Probably Disagree	11	10.8	10.8	29.4
Valid Probably Agree	12	11.8	11.8	41.2
Agree	23	22.5	22.5	63.7
Strongly Agree	37	36.3	36.3	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

11. Trying to rehabilitate a sex offender is a waste of time.

Table 3. CATSO 11

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Missing	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Strongly Disagree	11	10.8	10.8	11.8
Disagree	20	19.6	19.6	31.4
Probably Disagree	21	20.6	20.6	52.0
Valid Probably Agree	19	18.6	18.6	70.6
Agree	14	13.7	13.7	84.3
Strongly Agree	16	15.7	15.7	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

12. Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.

Table 4. CATSO 12

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Missing	2	2.0	2.0	2.0
Strongly Disagree	4	3.9	3.9	5.9
Valid Disagree	6	5.9	5.9	11.8
Probably Disagree	13	12.7	12.7	24.5
Probably Agree	21	20.6	20.6	45.1

Agree	16	15.7	15.7	60.8
Strongly Agree	40	39.2	39.2	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

18. Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison.

Table 5. CATSO 18

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Missing	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Strongly Disagree	11	10.8	10.9	11.9
Disagree	19	18.6	18.8	30.7
Probably Disagree	23	22.5	22.8	53.5
Valid Probably Agree	16	15.7	15.8	69.3
Agree	11	10.8	10.9	80.2
Strongly Agree	20	19.6	19.8	100.0
Total	101	99.0	100.0	
Missing System	1	1.0		
Total	102	100.0		

These five questions are factored on the CATSO-R scale as items that indicate a person's attitude toward a sex offender's capacity to change. A comparison with probation and community correction workers attitudes is included, and it will be offered in the next section of this report. When scoring the factors, Question 1 is reversed scored; however, for the purpose of this report, no factor scores are reported. Instead, we are examining the percentage results of answers to the Likert survey.

Independent Variable

The “lifetime victim” variable was chosen for this report, and is one of eight independent variables from the demographic portion of the survey. In this case, as previously noted, 78% of female prisoners reported being sexually abused or sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

Demographic survey question

LIFETIME VICTIM: Have you ever been sexually abused or sexually assaulted* in your lifetime?

Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____

**Sexual assault is defined as nonconsensual contact between the penis and vulva, penis and anus, the mouth and penis, mouth and vulva, or mouth and anus.*

Table 6. Life time victim

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no	20	19.6	20.0	20.0
	yes	78	76.5	78.0	98.0
	Not sure	2	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	100	98.0	100.0	
Missing	System	2	2.0		
	Total	102	100.0		

An analysis of variance test (ANOVA) was performed on the IV in relation to Factor 2/Capacity to Change, which indicated no significant variance in answers between the attitudes of those who did and those who did not report lifetime victimage. [Note: All questions in Factor 2 indicate $p = > .05$]

Table 7. ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
catso 1 rev	Between Groups	2.782	3	.927	.407	.748
	Within Groups	223.296	98	2.279		
	Total	226.078	101			
catso 2	Between Groups	6.005	3	2.002	.691	.560
	Within Groups	284.083	98	2.899		
	Total	290.088	101			
catso 11	Between Groups	7.579	3	2.526	.953	.418
	Within Groups	259.912	98	2.652		
	Total	267.490	101			
catso 12	Between	.550	3	.183	.070	.976

	Groups					
	Within Groups	254.950	98	2.602		
	Total	255.500	101			
	Between					
	Groups	4.328	3	1.443	.486	.693
catso 18	Within Groups	291.172	98	2.971		
	Total	295.500	101			

These results indicate that lifetime sexual abuse or sexual assault had no bearing on female prisoner attitudes regarding sex offender capacity to change; therefore, with no variance in this regard, we will look at the overall results of the general population to identify prisoner attitudes toward sex offenders. Although the results of the ANOVA support the null hypothesis and suggest no difference exists in attitudes toward sex offenders' capacity to change between those who have and those who have not experienced lifetime sexual victimization, this analysis does not impinge upon the theory, which may indicate that those who have a working relationship with, or personal knowledge of, sex offenders and/or their victims will have more favorable attitudes toward sex offenders. Instead, it supports this hypothesis and may show that, at least in the case of female prisoners, their attitudes toward sex offenders will be more favorable than other community members, who have less or no experience with sex offenders or their victims.

Results

In Question 1, only 46% of female prisoners agreed with the statement that support and therapy could positively affect the behavior of sex offenders, which was less than a recent CATSO-R study of probation and community correction workers' attitudes on this question. In this study, 55.4% of professionals agreed with the statement. The results of this question are interesting. Given that a majority of participants have experienced at least one lifetime sexual assault or incidence of abuse, they may have doubts about a sex offender's ability to change; however, over half of prisoner participants (51%) indicated that rehabilitation of sex offenders was worth the effort. This seeming disconnect between two similar and related ideas may suggest that although prisoner victims of sexual assault may have doubts about ability to change, they still hold hope that rehabilitation might work for sex offenders.

There is a clear difference between prisoner attitudes and professional attitudes when asked about abrogating civil rights for sex offenders. In the Montana study, 60% of workers disagreed that sex offenders should lose civil rights; however, 70.6% of F-PATSO participants felt otherwise. This disparity might be due in part to lower educational achievement for prisoner participants whose average highest grade completed was a high school diploma or GED. This attitude might arise from a simple lack of understanding the definition of civil rights and the social ramifications of being denied Constitutional protections. While a super majority (82%) of criminal justice workers sees rehabilitation as a worthwhile endeavor, both groups appear to support rehabilitation to some degree. Both groups overwhelmingly support the use of tracking devices for sex offenders. Prisoners support this idea with 76% of participants agreeing with the statement, and Montana corrections workers weighing in at 65%. Finally, on the question of never releasing sex offenders from prison, a small majority of female prisoners disagreed with the idea of keeping sex offenders locked up forever, which paralleled probation and correction worker attitudes, although the margin was much greater with correction employees (53% v. 82%, respectively).

These results indicate more similar than disparate attitudes toward sex offenders between these two groups. Further study, particularly with male prisoners, is necessary to test the reach of the hypothesis. Given that male prisoners are particularly punitive toward sex offenders, it will be necessary to expand on cultural and sociological explanations to define the reactions of both males and females toward sex offenders.

Conclusion

The topic of attitudes toward sex offenders is complex. The subject of sex offenders and sex crimes, in general, often evokes emotional responses from the general public, which has led researchers to attempt to develop

survey instruments that will capture peoples' attitudes on this subject. While it is agreed that attitudes may arise from stereotypical ideas, the social implications of sexual abuse cannot be underestimated, and neither should the consequences of sexual abuse and sexual assault be conflated with the outcomes of other crimes that diverge from the deliberate trespassing of an individual's physical sovereignty via the sexual body by another's body. It is a serious miscarriage of human rights justice when researchers compare recidivism rates of incongruent crimes, as if all crime is comparable merely because it is deemed a criminal act. Equating the loss of a vehicle with the loss of a child's sexual autonomy is perverse and clearly lacking in rationale, that is, an inanimate object such as a vehicle can be replaced, but studies indicate what is intuitively known at the human level of compassionate understanding that a flesh and blood child who is sexually and/or physically abused will be negatively affected on several levels (emotional, psychological, and physical) for the rest of his or her life (BJS, 1999; Kendall-Tackett, 2002).

Furthermore, a plethora of studies on sexual assault show that a majority of victims know their perpetrator. The fact that friends and family are most likely the people who choose to use a child or a woman as a means to an end for sexual gratification can be seen as one of the greatest of all human rights violations perpetrated mostly by men. The problem of sexual assault is, indeed, a grave human problem. The victims, who are overwhelmingly women and children of both genders, have a vested interest in shining the light on a social issue that has been traditionally kept in the dark. The illumination of this insidious problem is only starting to be recognized as the instigator of a great deal of human calamity.

The overall purpose of the Prisoner Attitudes Toward Sex Offender (PATSO) study is several-fold. It can be used positivistically to enhance educational opportunities in prisons, particularly if stereotypical ideas emerge in the data. On the other hand, it may show that governmental administration must be educated about the prison population's sex offender *savvy*. Future results may emerge from male inmates that show their violent reactions are not emerging from misunderstanding sex offenders, but are merely instinctive expressions made by rational individuals to the threat posed by a sex offender's presence. The PATSO study is also a jumping-off point for future prison research in the area of further understanding prisoner attitudes. While conducting the survey at PWCC, researchers heard from several prisoners who expressed positive feelings about being included in the conversation about sex offenders. Instead of perpetuating the notion that individuals deemed by law makers as social deviants have nothing to offer society, researchers and policy makers must begin looking to the prisoner for answers to questions about crimes that continue to plague U.S. culture. Individuals who have little or no personal or peripheral knowledge of sexual offending or sexual victimage will not find the answers to these questions using the hierarchical model of top down/outside in. The answers to many criminal justice questions that ask "why," exist in the broken hearts of U.S. prisoners who, at one time, were (like every other person on the planet) innocent and hopeful human children.

References

- Church, W.T., Wakeman, E. E., Miller, S.L., Clements, C.B. & Sun, F. (2008). The Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offender Scale: The development of a psychometric instrument. *Research on Social Work Practice, 18*(3), 251-259.
- Ferguson, K., & Ireland, C.A. (2006). Attitudes toward sex offenders and the influence of Offence type: A comparison of staff working in a forensic setting and students. *The British Journal of Forensic Practice, 8*(2), 10-19.
- Harlow, C. W. (1999). Prior abuse reported by inmates and probationers. U.S. Department of Justice. *Bureau of Justice Statistics: Selected findings*. NCJ 172879.
- Hogue, T. E. (1993). Attitudes toward prisoners and sexual offenders. *Issues in Criminal & Legal Psychology, 19*, 23-32.
- Kendall-Tackett, K. (2002). The health effects of childhood abuse: four pathways by which abuse can influence health. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 26*, 6-7.
- Lea, S., Auburn, T. & Kibblewhite, K. (1999). Working with sex offenders: The perceptions and experiences of professionals and paraprofessionals. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 43*, 103-119.
- United States Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, the White House Council on Women and Girls, and the White House Advisor on Violence Against Women. (2010). *Sexual violence in the United States: Summary of roundtable proceedings*.

Appendix

Independent variables

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
age	101	47	19	66	36.58	11.354
sentence length yrs	102	99	1	100	13.14	22.493
time served months	102	360	6	366	54.23	61.280
Lifetime victim	102	3	0	3	.86	.527
ethnicity	102	6	1	7	4.78	2.042
gender	102	2	1	3	1.02	.198
education	102	6	0	6	1.50	1.341
sexual orientation	101	3	0	3	1.58	.725
Valid N (listwise)	100					

Ethnicity: 1= Native American/Alaska Native; 2=Latino/Latina; 3=Asian; 4=African-American/Black; 5=Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian; 6=White; 7=Other

Gender: 1=Female; 2=Male; 3=Transgender

Education: 0=Not a high school graduate; 1=High School Diploma/GED; 2=Some College; 3=Technical

Sexual Orientation: 1=Heterosexual; 2=Bisexual; 3=Homosexual Certification; 4=Associate's Degree; 5=Bachelor's Degree; 6=Graduate Degree

Frequencies

Ethnicity

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Native American/Alaskan	13	12.7	12.7	12.7
Latina/Latino	15	14.7	14.7	27.5
African-American/Black	1	1.0	1.0	28.4
White	70	68.6	68.6	97.1
Other	3	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid female	101	99.0	99.0	99.0
transgender	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
no diploma	21	20.6	20.6	20.6
diploma/GED	41	40.2	40.2	60.8
Valid some college	24	23.5	23.5	84.3
technical cert	7	6.9	6.9	91.2
assoc degree	4	3.9	3.9	95.1
bach degree	3	2.9	2.9	98.0
graduate degree		2	2.0	2.0
Total		102	100.0	100.0

Sexual Orientation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
missing	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
hetero	53	52.0	52.5	53.5
Valid Bi	34	33.3	33.7	87.1
homo	13	12.7	12.9	100.0
Total	101	99.0	100.0	
Missing System	1	1.0		
Total	102	100.0		