

Examining Prison Wardens' Perceptions of Inmates Incarcerated for Sex Offenses

By David Patrick Connor and Richard Tewksbury

Both popular culture and prison folklore suggest that convicted sex offenders are a highly stigmatized group inside correctional institutions. The limited existing research on the prison experiences of sex offenders generally supports such prominent notions. Incarcerated sex offenders, based on available literature, are commonly regarded as social outcasts.¹ In the eyes of other criminal offenders, sex offenders are largely viewed as undesirable and unfit to become members of the inmate community.² As a direct result of their "inferior standing," sex offenders are seemingly more prone to exploitation and victimization. Jane L. Ireland, Joanne Leddy and Michael O'Connell contend that the sex offender label renders an inmate susceptible to violence and sexual assault.³ Prison staff members also recognize that sex offenders hold the lowest status among inmates.⁴ However, there is relatively little known about how prison wardens perceive the experiences of sex offenders inside prisons.

This study considers the attitudes and beliefs of prison wardens regarding the incarceration experiences of sex offenders. Wardens are an important population to examine, as such individuals uniquely understand the activities, culture and structure of the prison environment in which sex offenders are often participants. For these reasons, wardens may provide valuable insight into the experiences of incarcerated sex offenders.

Methodology

Data for the present analysis originated from voluntary, anonymous surveys administered by the authors to state prison wardens employed in 19 jurisdictions throughout the U.S. The surveys gauged how wardens understood, perceived and responded to

the management of sex offenders in correctional institutions. Specifically, the survey items measured wardens' views of sex offenders as prison inmates and sex offender survival strategies. Each of these items presented a statement, and respondents were invited to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with each statement. Responses to these items were coded at the ordinal level (strongly agree=1, agree=2, disagree=3, strongly disagree=4). For more information, see Tables 1 and 2.

The 19 statewide correctional jurisdictions were randomly selected for the study. Among these jurisdictions, all four geographic regions in the U.S. were represented: Midwest (n=4); Northeast (n=2); South (n=6); and West (n=7). All 240 wardens of state-operated facilities from these jurisdictions were invited to participate. A total of 68 wardens (response rate of 28.3 percent) submitted completed surveys.

Respondents were mostly male (83.8 percent), white (76.1 percent) and married/partnered (83.6 percent). They ranged in age from 37 to 65, with a mean age of 52. One-third of respondents held a graduate degree, and one-third had children under the age of 18. Respondents had an average of more than eight years of experience as prison wardens, and their political views were self-characterized as more conservative than liberal.

Findings

Table 1 presents prison wardens' perceptions of sex offenders as prison inmates. Generally, these findings show that sex offenders are recognized as highly marginalized inmates; however, they are not necessarily seen as problematic for institutional management.

Nearly all wardens (98.5 percent) believed that most inmates consider sex offenses involving children to be appalling conduct. A majority (76.1 percent) believed that sex offenders are at the bottom of the prison inmate hierarchy. Although 70.2 percent of respondents agreed that incarcerated sex offenders are routinely subjected to hostility from other inmates, less than one-half (43.3 percent) felt that incarcerated sex offenders are routinely subjected to physical attacks from other inmates. Indeed, when sex offenders arrive in prison, nearly all surveyed wardens (97.1 percent) did not consider their lives to be in greater danger than other inmates.

Most surveyed prison wardens (86.6 percent) affirmed that their jurisdictions provide adequate protection for incarcerated sex offenders. A majority (80.6 percent), however, did not believe that it is important to house sex offenders in separate institutions or housing units designated specifically for such inmates. Still, more than one-half (59.7 percent) felt that sex offenders are not as safe in prison as inmates convicted of other crimes. Because of their vulnerability in prison, the majority of respondents (52.3 percent) believed that sex offenders pose unique challenges for institutional management.

Table 2 shows prison wardens' attitudes and beliefs regarding survival strategies that sex offenders may adopt during their incarceration. In order to protect themselves from the recognized high risk of inmate violence directed toward sex offenders, most surveyed wardens (91.1 percent) felt that sex offenders should not disclose their offenses to other inmates. And yet, only a few (16.4 percent) believed that incarcerated sex offenders should consider living in protective custody in order to protect themselves from such a risk.

Discussion

Findings from this study highlight prison wardens' views about sex offenders as prison inmates, as well as attitudes and beliefs toward sex offender survival strategies. Wardens generally recognize sex offenders as among the most marginalized inmates; however, these inmates are not necessarily seen as problematic for institutional management. Although violence aimed at sex offenders is acknowledged, wardens do not automatically perceive incarcerated sex offenders as inevitable victims of such violence. Thus, from the vantage point of wardens, popular notions about incarcerated sex offenders as a stigmatized group are at least somewhat supported.

At the same time, correctional agencies that are responsible for supervising inmates appear to be appropriately managing the welfare of sex offenders. From the perspective of wardens, on the whole, jurisdictions are actively protecting incarcerated sex offenders from violence perpetrated by other inmates. This is not to say that new approaches to sex offender management are unwelcomed. However, more than one-half of wardens feel that sex offenders are not as safe in prison as other inmates, and that they pose unique challenges. Moreover, separate institutions or housing units designated specifically for sex offenders appear not to be necessary strategies. Future research should consider alternatives to assist prison administrators in protecting sex offenders who are recognized as highly stigmatized within the inmate community. In this way, safer prisons may evolve that are more conducive to rehabilitation, which may in turn lead to decreased recidivism and increased reintegration among formerly incarcerated sex offenders.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Clemmer, D. 1958. *The prison community*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
 Colvin, M. 1982. The 1980 New Mexico prison riot. *Social Problems*, 29(5): 449-463.
 Irwin, J. 1980. *Prisons in turmoil*. Boston: Little, Brown.
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Table 1. Prison Wardens' Perceptions of Sex Offenders

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Most inmates consider sex offenses involving children to be appalling conduct.	59.7% n=40	38.8% n=26	1.5% n=1	0.0% n=0
Sex offenders are at the bottom of the prison inmate hierarchy.	23.9% n=16	52.2% n=35	20.9% n=14	3.0% n=2
Incarcerated sex offenders are routinely subjected to hostility from other inmates.	6.0% n=4	64.2% n=43	28.4% n=19	1.5% n=1
Incarcerated sex offenders are routinely subjected to physical attacks from other inmates.	3.0% n=2	40.3% n=27	49.3% n=33	7.5% n=5
When sex offenders arrive in prison, they are in immediate life-threatening danger.	1.5% n=1	1.5% n=1	67.2% n=45	29.9% n=20
My jurisdiction actively protects incarcerated sex offenders from inmate violence.	26.9% n=18	59.7% n=40	10.4% n=7	3.0% n=2
In order to ensure their safety, it is important to house sex offenders in separate institutions or housing units designated specifically for such inmates.	6.0% n=4	13.4% n=9	53.7% n=36	26.9% n=18
Sex offenders are not as safe in prison as inmates convicted of other crimes.	6.0% n=4	53.7% n=36	37.3% n=25	3.0% n=2
Because of their vulnerability in prison, sex offenders pose unique challenges for institutional management.	7.5% n=5	44.8% n=30	41.8% n=28	6.0% n=4

Waldram, J.B. 2012. *Hound pound narrative: Sexual offender habilitation and the anthropology of therapeutic intervention*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

² Akerstrom, M. 1986. Outcasts in prison: The cases of informers and sex offenders. *Deviant Behavior*, 7(1): 1-12.

³ Ireland, J.L. 2002. *Bullying among prisoners: Evidence, research and intervention strategies*. New York: Routledge.
 Leddy, J. and M. O'Connell. 2002. The prevalence, nature and psychological correlates of bullying in Irish prisons. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 7(2): 131-140.

⁴ Sapp, A.D. and M.S. Vaughn. 1990. The social status of adult and juvenile sex offenders in prison: An analysis of the importation model. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 6(2): 2-7.

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