



# Correctional Officers' Perceptions of Sexual Offenders in the United States: A Qualitative Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Support for public policies aimed at increasing prison sentences for sexual offenders (SOs) has been mounting. The growing number of inmates in prisons places a burden on taxpayers and calls for solutions to reduce recidivism rates. Correctional officers (COs) are at the forefront of interacting with inmate populations. A review of the literature indicated that the perceptions of COs have been linked to an inmate's willingness to participate in rehabilitation programs. Moreover, SOs participating in rehabilitation programs have shown lower levels of recidivism. Thus it is important to describe the perceptions of COs regarding SOs. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the subjective lived experiences of 15 COs who were recruited both by purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. This research contributes to the existing literature and can promote social change through the development of prison training programs focused on educating COs on balancing negative views of SOs with professionalism.*

Keywords: Correctional Officers, Perceptions, Sexual Offenders, Recidivism, Policies.

## Introduction

Prisons are dangerous places and prison employees must interact with society's most difficult members. Correctional officers (COs), who provide the first line of direct contact with inmates, are expected to maintain safety and security. The interaction with inmates on a daily basis to ensure safety is the main function of the CO (Udechukwu, 2009). Views have changed about what works best for correcting inmate behavior to ensure they return to be productive members of society. COs have been trained in two separate methods that fluctuate between punitive measures and promoting rehabilitation. Over the last 20 years there has been a slow integration of attitudes and perceptions that rehabilitation may be the most appropriate prison environment (Craig, 2004; Steiner, Wada, Hemmens, & Burton, 2005). Despite the prison environment moving slowly back to a rehabilitation model, COs continue to struggle with supporting attitudes for

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punishment. This is important because the COs attitudes directly impact the inmates' ability to adjust to the prison environment (Vuolo & Kruttschnitt, 2008). COs' negative attitudes toward rehabilitation encourages inmates to disregard prison programs that have shown benefits in reducing rates of recidivism. COs positive attitudes about rehabilitation support inmate participation in these programs and lead to better outcomes for inmates when released into the community (Taxman & Ainsworth, 2009).

Sexual offenders (SOs) represent a specific subset of the inmate population. Negative perceptions of SOs have led to the development of strict SO legislation and federal guidelines have been established in an attempt to streamline SO policies including increasing sentences for sexual offenses (National Conference of State Legislators, 2011). Increased prison time means that SOs will have more interaction with COs. Research has excluded the experiences of COs regarding their perceptions of SOs. The direct daily contact that COs have with SOs provides the first social interaction these offenders face after conviction and sentencing occurs. Therefore, it is important to understand COs' perceptions about these interactions. Understanding the COs perceptions of SOs will provide some insight into the problems offenders face in regards to rehabilitation inside the prison system. This will lead to developing more effective training programs that inform COs about the impact their interactions have with SOs and the offenders' willingness to seek treatment options; moreover, treatment will help reduce the recidivism rates of SOs once they are released into the community (Olver, Wong, & Nicholaichuk, 2009).

### **Review of Literature**

COs present differing perceptions of inmate populations and these views are connected to a desire to depersonalize relationships with inmates. The depersonalizing attitudes of COs create social distance when interacting with inmates and this is a result of negative perceptions regarding inmate rehabilitation being ineffective (Lambert, Hogan, Altheimer, Jiang, & Stevenson, 2010). The social distance created between COs and inmates is a result of their perceptions of prisons being too lenient on the inmates. COs favoring a more punitive correctional mindset were more likely to encourage attitudes that support social distance with inmates (Young & Antonio, 2009). COs creating social distance when interacting with inmates were more likely to write inmates up or use force rather than interacting with them (Freeman, 2003; Griffin, 1999).

COs have been shown to hold more negative views regarding inmate rehabilitation than other correctional staff (Antonio, Young, & Wingard, 2009; Lambert & Hogan, 2009; Young, Antonio, & Wingard, 2009). Their negative views are related to perceptions that support a more punitive prison environment rather than one that encourages rehabilitation (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2008). The perceptions of COs regarding rehabilitation have a relationship with specific personal characteristics. COs seeking employment in prisons with the intention of helping others were more likely to support rehabilitation when compared to COs entering the field for other reasons (Moon & Maxwell 2004). Seniority, work stress, role problems, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment were found to have significant relationships in regards to the perceptions of COs. COs' perceptions regarding inmate rehabilitation was more positive as their time in service increased (Antonio & Young, 2011). Those COs that were more satisfied with their jobs, experienced lower levels of work stress, and were provided structure and support from supervisors were more likely to have positive perceptions

regarding inmate rehabilitation (Moon & Maxwell, 2004). Furthermore, COs with high levels of organizational commitment were more likely to hold onto perceptions that supported inmate rehabilitation (Lambert & Hogan, 2009; Lambert, Hogan, Barton, Jiang, & Baker, 2008).

Despite the negative perceptions COs hold regarding other inmate populations and inmates in general and the desire of COs to create social distance, this is not the case with inmates with mental health concerns. COs hold more positive views of inmates with mental health concerns, which is connected to beliefs that these inmates are less responsible for their actions (Callahan, 2004; Short et al., 2009). COs are more accepting of mental health inmates and hold more positive attitudes about them because they see the need for rehabilitation in this population (Penn, Esposito, Stein, Lacher-Katz, & Spirito, 2005). They hold onto negative perceptions of other inmates because they see their behavior as directed and thus in need of punishment rather than rehabilitation.

Little research has been done on COs' perceptions of SOs. Only three studies are known to address COs' perceptions of SOs. Weekes, Pelletier, and Beaudette (1995) identified the perceptions of correctional staff as they related to SOs and compared them in regards to specific offending patterns. SOs committing crimes against children were viewed as immoral and struggling with mental illness. SOs were viewed as dangerous, violent, and unpredictable. The study identified negative perceptions associated with SOs; however, it was unclear if these perceptions were connected to perceptions regarding rehabilitation. Lea, Auburn, and Kibblewhite (1999) found that four professionals and paraprofessionals had an internal conflict working with SOs that stemmed from two personal beliefs: sexual behaviors should be admonished and a working relationship with the SOs should be established. A more recent study by Higgins and Ireland (2009), which compared the attitudes of prison staff, forensic staff, and the general public regarding SOs, indicated that prison staff displayed the most negative views of SOs; they felt that this population should not be trusted and maintained the belief that SOs are immoral. The present study tries to fill the research gap on the COs' perceptions of SOs.

## **Method**

Given the limited research in the literature on the perceptions of COs despite their day to day interactions with SOs over an extended period of time, the following three research questions were developed.

- What are the perceptions of COs regarding SOs?
- How do COs describe their experiences in working with SOs?
- What are the perceptions of COs regarding SO rehabilitation?

A qualitative research method was chosen for this research because COs have been an unrepresented group in regards to their experiences with SOs and it is important to begin to understand the nature of the phenomenon rather than determine the relationships between identifiable variables. It is important to gain insight into how this population processes their experiences with SOs and begin to identify themes that may be present through exploring the perceptions of this population. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand COs' perceptions of SOs in order to develop training tools for COs. The goal would be to create more effective social interactions with SOs to help encourage their participation in prison rehabilitation programs.

## Participant Selection and Procedures

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to obtain 15 participants from the Northeastern Region of the United States for this research study. Participants of this study were selected from male and female COs working with SOs inside of federal, state, and local prisons interacting on the website corrections.com. Data was collected through the use of in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted at locations suggested by the participants with the choice of utilizing the researcher's office, a public venue, or their home. At the beginning of each interview, the informed consent form was reviewed including the voluntary nature of the program, the potential risks associated with discussing their perceptions regarding SOs, and their ability to discontinue the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. During the interview process, a snow ball sampling strategy was utilized in order to obtain more participants. An audio recording device referred to as a Smartpen was utilized to record the interviews.

## Data Analysis

The analysis process consisted of six steps: (a) bracketing presumptions, (b) reading and rereading the transcribed interviews, (c) horizontalization of the data, (d) developing meaning units, (e) forming themes, and (f) an exhaustive description. An external coder was utilized for verification of the identified themes extrapolated from the transcripts. The researcher, along with the external coder, followed the same six steps throughout the analysis process. Bracketing presumptions was utilized at the onset of the data analysis and continued throughout the analysis process. The bracketing process occurred through the use of a hand written journal. The researcher's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions related to each stage of the data analysis process was documented in the journal. Each transcript was read several times without identifying any subjects or significant statements made by the participants. Horizontalization of the data involved beginning to read through the transcripts to identify significant statements made by the participants. An initial step in horizontalization of the data for this study was to underline significant statements in the transcripts using a pencil. Those statements were categorized separately in a word document and overlapping ideas were sorted out.

The significant statements identified and categorized in the word document were reviewed in order to begin to develop meaning units. The process of identifying meaning units involved focusing on those significant statements that directly connected to the COs' perceptions regarding SOs. This also included focusing on perceptions regarding SO rehabilitation. The meaning units were color coded using different highlighters in the word document to identify those that were similar. The next step in the data analysis process involved organizing the meaning units into themes. The color coded meaning units were placed into separate word documents according to the color coding system. The meaning units were identified as those describing the essence of the lived experiences of COs regarding their perceptions of SOs and those focusing on perceptions of SO rehabilitation. The color coding of meaning units and the use of the separate word documents helped when comparing the developed themes to those of the independent coder. Specific words or phrases were identified to indicate the themes extracted from the meaning units. These themes became the basis for answering the research questions and for providing a thick description of the subjective experiences of the COs. The final step in the data analysis process involved providing an exhaustive description of the lived experiences of COs regarding their perceptions of SOs.

## Data Verification

Four strategies were utilized throughout this study to ensure trustworthiness: member checking, audit trail, reflexive journaling, and thick description. Member checking occurred twice during the data collection and data analysis phase of this study. The initial member checking step occurred within 48 hours after the interviews were transcribed. Participants were emailed a copy of the interview transcripts and asked to indicate the accuracy of the transcripts. An additional member-checking strategy was implemented after themes were identified through analysis of the transcripts. Participants were emailed the identified themes along with a summary of the themes and asked to verify whether they accurately reflected their perceptions regarding SOs. Audit trailing occurred through a use of a log. The audit trail log was used for observational field notes of nonverbal communication during the interview process. These recordings were transcribed onto a computer word document and stored in a protected file. Reflexive journaling was important in order to bracket the researcher's perceptions and to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the subjective experiences and perceptions of the COs. The reflexive journaling process paralleled the audit trail documentation in order to ensure that the research study can be replicated in other settings. An observational log was maintained throughout each interview and was used to provide a thick description of the participants' subjective perceptions regarding SOs documented in the findings section. A final step of trustworthiness was included in this study to ensure that researcher bias was controlled through the use of an independent coder. An independent coder was utilized during the data analysis phase in order to ensure that presumptions were bracketed and that the subjective perceptions of COs about SOs were accurately reflected in the findings.

## Results

Six themes were developed from the psychological context of the meaning units: negative perceptions; perception development through social outlets and work; need for protection; balancing personal perceptions with professionalism; insignificant treatment mitigated by motivation and offense characteristics; and prison support linked to participation, finances, and image. These themes along with a textual and structural description of the lived experiences of COs regarding SOs help to provide answers to the three research questions.

### 1. Negative Perceptions

There was consensus from participants regarding their perceptions of SOs indicating a negative overall view. The responses from participants ranged from identifying dislike for them to an increasing level of negative perceptions. Three participants described SOs as sneaky including Participant O's description of them:

*I hate what they stand for, what they do, the way they connive and end up in that situation you know. The deceitfulness you know, the people who they are deceiving in order to get into that situation is just disgusting and it's normally, it's not just the run of the mat to hear the grooming and the effort that they put forth is disturbing.*

Others chose to dehumanize SOs viewing them as a number or an animal rather than a human being. Participant F reported perceptions of SOs as nonexistent and that it was easier to see them as a number. Other participants held even stronger negative perceptions in regards to their view of SOs in society. Participants B, C, D, and H viewed SOs as

scum including Participant D reporting that SOs were: “the scum of the earth”. These participants stated that sexual offenses are horrible and they hold a general dislike for them. They perceived SOs as lower members of society even when comparing them to others convicted of crimes. These negative perceptions went as far as to compare SOs to murders with Participant B indicating that SOs were worse than murders. Still other participants held even stronger negative perceptions. Participant I reported a general dislike for SOs and further added that they should be harmed in some way. Participant E may have held the strongest negative views describing the following perception:

*We can weed down the population real quick. If we went over the whole wide earth and said okay once it's proven, as long as you have proof beyond a reasonable doubt that this person committed this crime of a sexual nature especially against a child or rape, bye bye.*

There was an overall consensus from participants that SOs are not liked, they are viewed as wayward members of society, and they are perceived to be untrustworthy, sneaky, manipulative, and cunning.

## **2. Perception Development through Social Outlets and Work**

There was a consensus among participants that perceptions of SOs developed through social outlets and through working with the sexual offender population. Participant B summed it up in this way:

*They developed throughout my life but working with them and being around them, okay you know when you don't work in a prison you hear about this stuff and then all you ever do is see them in the paper and you see what they are labeled, um but once you are in a room full of them it's a different story.*

Other participants expressed similar perceptions in regards to social media outlets providing a basis for the development of perceptions regarding SOs followed by first hand work experience. The perceptions were described as being influenced through stories in the media about current events regarding SOs. Hearing about these stories provided influence to the participants but working with the SO population on a daily basis further enhanced these perceptions.

Other participants discussed hearing stories about SOs in their neighborhoods or through media outlets. The majority of the participants denied discussing SOs in their home with family members other than hearing warnings from parents about getting to close to certain people in the community.

## **3. Need for Protection**

There was an overwhelming consensus among the participants that part of their responsibility as a CO was to protect SOs inside of the prison. This need for protection stemmed from perceptions that viewed SOs as hated by other inmates and perceptions of them being weak, vulnerable, calm, obedient, and docile.

Although COs hold negative perceptions of SOs, they feel that they have a duty to protect them from other inmates. Participant E addressed why part of the job of a CO was to protect SOs:

*You know it's real simple, if there is one thing I learned working in the jail the general populous of inmates do not like what they like to call tree jumpers, child molesters, rapists, you, you pretty much have a hard target on your back once the other populous finds out. That's why 99.9% of SOs are put in protective custody for their own safety.*

Other participants discussed specific examples of job duties which included the protection of SOs from other inmates and in some cases from other COs. Several participants described SOs as an easy block to work on because they are different from other inmates. Part of the ease in working with this population is because these differences lead to the need to protect SOs from other inmates. Most participants viewed SOs as vulnerable and scared and part of their job responsibilities was to protect this vulnerable population.

#### **4. Balancing Personal Perceptions with Professionalism**

There was an overwhelming response from participants in this study that personal views regarding SOs need to be set aside when working with them. The work environment was described as one in which COs display a level of professionalism in which bias needs to be kept to a minimum and SOs need to be treated just like any other inmate. Participant B described this balance between personal views and professionalism in this manner:

*I mean um on the outside and to myself I think about them but in the prison I realize that I have to treat them just like anyone else. It's my job; I mean I can't discriminate against them. I can't do one thing for one person and not do it for another just because of their crime. It's my job to treat them, you know on the same level, um equally.*

There was overall agreement among the participants in regards to maintaining a professional level in working with SOs and using professionalism to balance negative views. Some described a sense of uneasiness, anxiety, and heightened awareness when working with this population and others discussed how knowledge of inmates being SOs and knowledge of their case led to a change in interaction. The main theme was that negative personal views need to be set aside and COs need to maintain a nonjudgmental, unbiased approach.

#### **5. Insignificant Treatment Mitigated by Motivation and Offense Characteristics**

Participants discussed their work experience as having a role in developing and enhancing their negative perceptions regarding SOs. These negative views and work experiences connect with their perceptions regarding SO rehabilitation as there is an overall belief among participants that this population cannot be rehabilitated. However, these views change when taking into account the offenders motivation to change and the specific offense characteristics of each offender. Several participants reported perceptions

that believed SO rehabilitation was ineffective. Participant G may have held the most negative views:

*I don't think they can really be fixed. They are broken, they are a broken person, they are deviant, they are a subculture of sodomizing wolves. A pack of wolves that preys on the weak and they sodomize, I mean they do it to each other, it's like a hierarchy...I mean they don't wanna be helped, they don't think there's anything wrong with them.*

Several participants believed that SO rehabilitation was ineffective, but the insignificance of the treatment could be counteracted by the offender's motivation to change. Several participants believed that SO rehabilitation could be effective for those that wanted help. Several participants discussed perceptions regarding the characteristics of the sexual offense. Rehabilitation was ineffective but it could be effective for certain offenders. Participants agreed that those SOs with one time offenses, those with indirect victims, and those that were younger had more of an opportunity for rehabilitation. There was unanimous agreement among participants that rehabilitation was insignificant, but this was mitigated by the motivation of the SO and by specific offense characteristics.

#### **6. Prison Support Linked to Participation, Finances, and Image**

Participants perceived prison support for SO programs as connected to whether the prison had the program, as well as the financial support and image it provided to the prison by those outside of the prison environment. Several participants defined prison support of SO rehabilitation by whether the prison participated in having a SO program. Participant B stated:

*I think that the prison does support it because the prison does have a program. So yes I believe the prison does support it.*

Financial reasons connected to mandatory SO rehabilitation programs was provided as a reason for prison support; moreover, several participants connected prison support for SO rehabilitation as a means to create a positive image to the mandating sources or the public. Other participants agreed that prison support was based on image but believed that it was connected to how the prison is viewed by the public. Despite some differences in the opinions of participants they clearly identified with prison support being associated with having the program, receiving some financial incentive or for having a positive image for those mandating programs or to the public.

#### **Discussion**

COs remain an unrepresented group in the literature when addressing their perceptions regarding SOs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of COs regarding this population. The interviews produced an overwhelming negative response from participants when addressing their perceptions of SOs. The participants described SOs as sneaky, manipulative, cunning, and untrustworthy. The participants' perceptions in this study paralleled past research in regards to the perceptions of COs regarding SOs. Higgins and Ireland (2009) compared the perceptions of different correctional staff and found that COs held the most negative views regarding



SOs. Weekes et al. (1995) also found correctional staff to view SOs with negative perceptions describing CO's perceptions of SOs as dangerous, violent, and unpredictable. Although there is a common theme here between this study and the current research, there is a clear contradiction in regards to the particular negative perceptions of the COs. The participants in this study did not view SOs as dangerous; in contrast, they perceived SOs as weak, vulnerable, calm, obedient, and docile and part of their job responsibility was a need to protect this vulnerable population.

The dialogue with participants helped to identify where their perceptions developed. Participants in this study reported that their perceptions were developed through social outlets and work experience. Participants heard stories about SOs living in their neighborhoods including warnings to stay away from them. Social outlets in the form of media were also identified by participants as a tool for developing perceptions about SOs. Participants also identified their work experience as a method for developing negative perceptions.

Participants discussed the importance of confronting their negative perceptions through using professionalism in working with SOs. Participants described this experience as a duty in which they needed to treat inmates fairly, to see them all the same, and to use professionalism to offset any negative personal perceptions of this population. These findings paralleled past research in which Lea et al. (1999) found that correctional staff working with SOs described an internal conflict related to their personal beliefs and finding a way to establish a working relationship with SOs. Participants described this experience in trying to work with SOs and using professionalism as the tool to establish a working relationship.

There is no direct research related to the perceptions of COs regarding SO rehabilitation; however, there is literature related to how the public views SO treatment. The public holds a general belief that SOs should remain in prison and that treatment is ineffective (Payne, Tewksbury, & Mustaine, 2010). COs participating in this study held similar beliefs reporting SO treatment as ineffective; however, there were caveats to this sentiment. COs believed that SOs who displayed some form of motivation to change were more likely to receive help through rehabilitation than those that were unmotivated to change. They also believed that different offense characteristics determined the offender's ability to be successful in rehabilitation. This focused on multiple offenses, large age differences, and sex crimes related to children and rape as being less likely to be rehabilitated. COs place a larger stigma on these groups of offenders and place them within the outsider group for being less likely to change their social status.

In regards to the final theme related to prison support, the research suggests that the perceptions of administrators in the correctional environment has wavered between perceptions of punishment being most appropriate versus perceptions that promote rehabilitation. Recent views have focused on the latter (Craig, 2004; Steiner et al., 2005). Participants in this research study believed that the prisons were supportive of SO rehabilitation; however, this support was a result of the prison's participation in having a SO rehabilitation program or external motives that sought financial support or a positive image. The participants' perceptions were based on a lack of understanding of how to define support and they used the prisons' participation in a SO program as a measure for whether they were supportive or not. They also believed that any support from prisons was based on exterior motives that brought money into the prison or allowed the prison

to maintain a positive image in the eyes of the public or those mandating the SO rehabilitation.

This research study provided information that will serve as a foundation for future studies that seek to understand relationships between COs perceptions and interaction with SOs. Future research should focus on different offender and offense characteristics and determine the relationship between these characteristics and the negative perceptions of COs. Participants indicated differences in perceptions between male and female SOs, between the age difference of the offender and the victim, and between those offenders who continue to offend and one time offenders. Participants also identified differences in perceptions based on individual offense characteristics. Future research should also focus on the relationship between negative perceptions and identification of SOs and knowledge of offense details. Participants discussed the difficulty in remaining professional once they were aware of an inmate being a SO or once they were aware of the specifics of the inmates' cases. The scope of this research study was limited to COs working in prisons in the Northeastern Region of the United States. Expanding the population to include COs living throughout the United States would provide a more complete overview of the perceptions of COs.

### Conclusion

The burden on taxpayers to support a continually increasing budget for correctional institutions speaks to the need to find an effective method for handling inmates inside the prison and to provide support for programs that work in reducing rates of recidivism when offenders are released back into the community. COs' perceptions of inmates has been linked to an inmate's willingness to participate in programs inside of the prison facility. SO programs in particular have been proven to be effective in reducing recidivism rates including those participating inside of the correctional environment. As more public policy is created to include longer prison sentences for SOs, understanding the perceptions of COs is critical.

The findings of this study will help to provide a starting point for prison administrators to develop programs that focus on identifying professionalism as a tool to balance negative views regarding SOs. Perceptions that may promote seeing SOs as serial rapists or serial pedophiles should be challenged and education regarding SO law could promote a different view of this population. COs perceiving an increased chance for offenders to change would be more willing to encourage SOs to participate in rehabilitation programs inside of the prison with the hope that these programs would be effective in reducing recidivism and create much needed social change.

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