

Societal Reaction to the Release of Sex Offenders

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored public views on the release of convicted sex offenders. A content analysis was conducted on the comments section of four newspaper articles about releases. One hundred and fifty-six comments were examined, and six prominent themes emerged including: Critiques of the criminal justice system, execution, life imprisonment, tattooing, race and physical disfigurement. Most comments were negative and voiced a desire for harsher punishment. Public perception of sex offenders largely reflected stereotyped media portrayals.

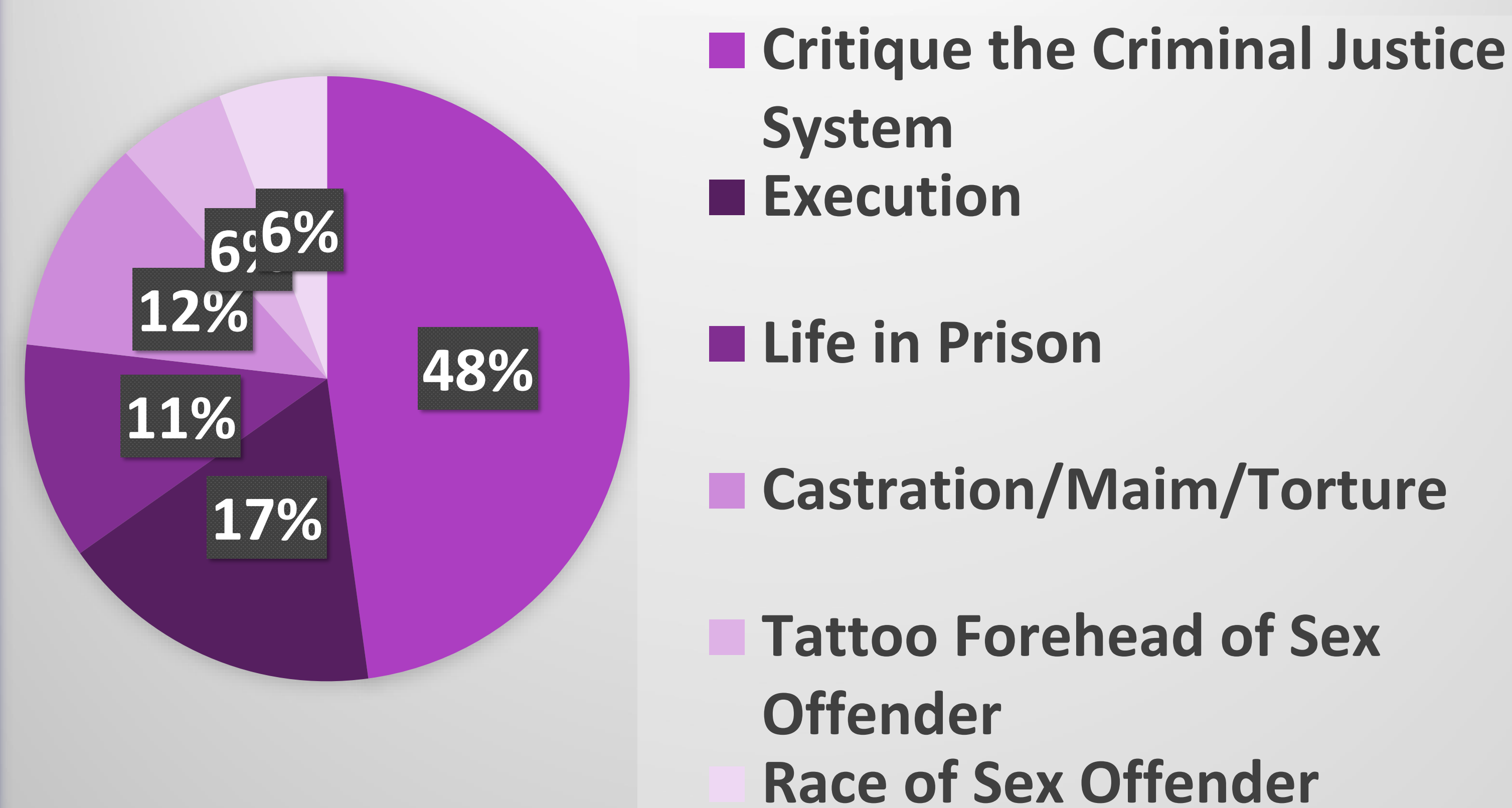
INTRODUCTION

The public's main source of information comes from media sources. As the central goal of the media is to produce a profit, the media sensationalizes sex crimes which inevitably creates profit but also generates moral panic in society. The resulting fear is largely due to exceptional cases. Myths about sexual offending and risks of recidivism are perpetuated by these portrayals (Malian, Willis & Johnston, 2012). Media portrayals differ from findings in empirical research, particularly in regard to recidivism rates and potential risks to the community (Malian, Willis & Johnston, 2012).

DISCUSSION

Negative and critical comments tended to focus on rationale for why offenders were being released, or ways in which the criminal justice system was ineffective for allowing the release of sex offenders. In addition, forceful expressions included explicit calls for action in dealing with sex offenders, particularly in terms of harsher punishment and ways to bring physical forms of harm to offenders as part of the punishment. Many comments explicitly and implicitly state all sex offenders should die and even went so far as describing in detail how they should die. The extreme nature of the comments demonstrates the panic amongst readers and the belief in misinformation such as high risk of recidivism.

Common Themes in Societal Response to Sex Offender Release



METHOD

A content analysis was used to analyze implicit and explicit comments about released sex offenders. The units of analysis were 156 posts in the comments section of four online news articles titled: "High-Risk Sex Offender to be Released from Stony Mountain Institution" – *Global News*, "A Sex Offender was Released on Parole. Weeks Later, Authorities say, he Raped a 7-year-old-girl" – *The Washington Post*, "Toronto Police say High Risk Sex Offender Released from Prison" – *Global News*, and "Sex Offender's Release Prompts Edmonton Police Warning" – *Edmonton Journal*.

Common Themes	Examples
Criminal Justice System	"Big question, why is the system letting him out?"
Execution	"He strangled a 7-year-old so he could rape her. He knows right from wrong. He tried to kill her so he could get his jollies. Please, PLEASE execute this man."
Life in Prison	"Rapists and child predators should NEVER be released from prison. Because it's not if they'll repeat their crimes, it's just when."
Tattoo Sex Offenders	"They should tattoo these guys right in the middle of their foreheads so our kids know to run far and fast when they see them coming."
Race of the Sex Offender	"White = early parole!"
Castrate/Maim/. Torture Sex Offender	"I'm telling you, REPEAT sex offenders like him needs to be CASTRATED."

References

Malinen, S., Willis, G.M., Johnston, L. (2013). Might informative media reporting of sexual offending influence community members' attitudes towards sex offender? *Psychology, Crime & Law*, (20)6, 535-552. doi:10.1080/1068316X.2013.793770