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## Attitudinal measures of college students' punitiveness toward sex offenders

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ATTITUDINAL MEASURES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS'  
PUNITIVENESS TOWARD SEX OFFENDERS

A Thesis

by

ANTONIO ZAMORANO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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December 2010



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## ABSTRACT

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The following experiment investigates punitiveness toward sex offenders using a sample of one hundred sixty students from the University of Texas-Pan American student population recruited from undergraduate introductory psychology courses and compensated with extra course credit. Punitiveness toward sex offenders was measured with six-point bipolar Likert scales using two attitudinal research methodologies: a randomly assigned between group experiment using a manipulated hypothetical crime scenario, and a survey using a shortened version of the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (CATSOS). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple comparison tests of attitudinal responses to the hypothetical crime scenario determined that violent sexual offenders face stronger punitive attitudes than violent offenders and non-violent sexual offenders for a subsequent non-sexually motivated crime, such as assault. Based on responses to the CATSOS, standard linear regression failed to determine any significant relationships between demographic variables and punitiveness toward sex offenders.





## DEDICATION

The completion of my thesis and graduate degree would not have been possible without the continuing support of my loving parents, Tony and Thelma Zamorano, as well as my siblings Mark, Darlene, and Tammy. They have always supported me in every way possible and have always encouraged me to further my education. I would also like to dedicate the completion of this project to the person that was always there to remind me of my academic abilities and give me the love that I needed when I felt like giving up, Cassandra Dayanira Gonzalez.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Punitiveness toward sex offenders has been empirically studied for several decades in social sciences while producing less than consistent results that can best be explained by differences in research methodology (Payne et. al., 2004) and varying operational definitions of punitiveness (Easton & Piper, 2005). Prior research has, however, identified several mediators of punitiveness, such as information pertaining to the offense and the offender (Payne et al., 2004). Prior research has also identified several possible predictors of punitiveness, including age (Leiber, Woodrick, & Roudebush, 1995; McCorckle, 1993), gender (Applegate et al., 2002), ethnicity (DeLisi, 2001), political ideology (Applegate et al., 2000; Dozier, 2008; Falco, 2008; Rogers & Ferguson, 2009), religiosity (Grasmick & McGill, 1994; Leiber, Woodrick, & Roudebush, 1995; Roberts & Indermaur, 2007), socioeconomic status (Kaukinen & Colavecchia, 1999), education (Roberts & Indermaur, 2007), and prior victimization (Dozier, 2009).

The present study examines college students' punitiveness toward sex offenders in a between group experiment using a manipulated hypothetical crime scenario and a survey using a shortened version of the Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (CATSOS). Participants were randomly assigned a hypothetical scenario in which the prior criminal history of the offender was manipulated among groups as a violent offender, sexual offender, violent sexual offender, or as an offender with no prior criminal history. Punitiveness toward the offender in each scenario was then measured using six-point bipolar Likert scale responses to a

seven-item questionnaire that was created by the experimenter. Additionally, participants were administered a shortened version of the CATSOS in conjunction with a demographic survey to determine what demographic variables, if any, were predictors of punitiveness toward sex offenders.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Prior Research of Punitive Attitudes**

Durkheim (1947) asserts that the punishment of offenders is an essential part of society's need to demonstrate disapproval of criminal behaviors. The majority of punitive research has focused on how individuals prefer to impose punishment and why they feel offenders should be punished for their crimes (Payne, et al., 2004). Additionally, the majority of punitive research suggests that punitiveness is influenced by several factors including information pertaining to the offense, characteristics of the offender, and demographic variables of the individual evaluating punishment (Payne et al., 2004).

Methodology employed by researchers to investigate punitiveness is major empirical issue in punitive research. Falco (2008) states that prior research on punitiveness has typically depended on the use of public opinion polls or surveys and that the limitations of this approach have resulted in a possible misunderstanding of conventional punitive attitudes among the general public. A major criticism of opinion polls is that survey questions may not have the ability to completely assess something as complex as an attitude toward sentencing (Mackey & Courtright, 2000; Roberts, 1997; Roberts et al., 2003; Turner et al., 1997). In addition to methodological issues of punitive research, the challenge of conceptually and operationally defining punitiveness has also resulted in mixed and contradicting results (Easton & Piper, 2005). Punitiveness has been conceptually defined in several ways, from specific sanctions, such

as imprisonment and support for capital punishment, to other forms of considerably less severe punishment, such as probation and mandating of rehabilitation (Falco, 2000).

Attitudes are psychological constructs of cognitive and affective processes (Fazio & Olsen, 2003) that encompass most, if not all, aspects of punishment, including potential behaviors. Matthews (2005) argues that prior research has made little effort to define punitiveness, but suggests that punitiveness is generally associated with concepts of vengeance and retribution. Courtright and Mackey (2004) define punitiveness as “an attitude toward sanctioning and punishment that includes retribution, incapacitation, and a lack of concern for offender rehabilitation.” Falco (2008) furthermore states that punitiveness is characterized by the method of punishment (restoration, retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, or rehabilitation) that is favored by the individual determining punishment.

### **Measuring Punitiveness**

The majority of attitudinal research suggests that the expressed intent to perform a behavior is the most reliable predictor of the individual’s engaging in the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Although a variety of attitudinal scales of measurement exist, Likert scales have been empirically shown to exhibit a much higher degree of reliability than other attitudinal scales of measurement (Barclay & Weaver, 1962).

**Likert scales.** Likert scales measure attitudes on an ordinal or interval scale with each point corresponding to a statement describing the extent to which an individual agrees or disagrees with an assenting or dissenting statement about a particular idea or population, in this case, sex offenders. Bipolar Likert scales with balanced statements of agreement and disagreement typically maintain higher validity than Likert scales with unbalanced statements (Ray, 1982).

Likert scales vary in length, but in order to maintain maximum validity and reliability, Likert scales that range between four and seven points are considered ideal (Lozano, et al., 2008). Likert scales that contain an even number of scale points and do not have a neutral point are considered as forced-choice because they require the participant to favor a direction of agreement or disagreement. Using a forced-choice approach assumes that every individual has some opinion on the issue in question and should be forced to express that opinion. Proponents of a neutral point argue that certain factors such as a lack of information might cause an individual to feel undecided and should therefore be included to prevent invalid responses (Vojir, 2006).

An issue with Likert scales is whether they should be considered ordinal or interval scales of measurement. The argument against treating Likert scales as interval data is that the intervals between scale-points are not necessarily equal (Jamieson, 2004). However, several studies demonstrate that Likert scale responses do in fact produce empirically valid interval data (Carifio & Perla, 2008).

**Hypothetical crime scenarios.** A particularly advantageous approach to measuring punitiveness is in response to a hypothetical crime scenario. Hypothetical crime scenarios are relatively inexpensive to produce, easy to administer, and allow the experimenter to control the amount of information available to the individual reading the scenario. Hypothetical crime scenarios are especially useful when exploring potentially sensitive topics (Martin, 2006) and allow individuals the opportunity to control the extent to which they involve their own personal experiences (Brocke et al., 2004). In order to minimize the effects of uncontrolled extraneous variables, hypothetical crime scenarios should be created to be as realistic, brief, and concise as possible (White, 1975). Additionally, hypothetical crime scenarios should include sufficient and

understandable context as well as attempt to maintain plausibility by avoiding the use of highly salient characters or events (Barter & Renold, 1999; Trute et al., 1996).

Another benefit of hypothetical crime scenarios is their ability to assess reactions from different groups while testing for the effects of manipulated information. The specificity of information in hypothetical crime scenarios allows insight to the effects of contextual manipulations on participant responses (Martin, 2006). Several offense and offender characteristics that are likely to influence punitiveness have been identified in experimental research using hypothetical crime scenarios with contextual manipulations, such as the perceived severity of the crime (White, 1975) and the prior criminal history of the offender (Hough et al., 2009).

***Crime severity.*** An individual's perception of crime severity has proven to be dependent on several types of crime-specific information including the nature of the offense. Violent offenses are typically considered more severe than crimes against property (McCorkle, 1993), and sexual offenses are typically considered more severe than non-sexual offenses (Dozier, 2009; Rogers & Ferguson, 2010). Furthermore, McCorkle (1993) found that additional contextual information such as damage to property and injury to the victim are also likely to increase the perceived severity of the crime, and Hough et al. (2009) identified several other types of crime-specific information that are likely to increase the perceived severity of the crime including the use of a weapon, child victimization, premeditation and, to a lesser extent, previous unrelated convictions.

As the perceived crime severity increases, individuals considering punishment are likely to favor stronger forms of punishment, such as incarceration (Dozier, 2009). Additionally, as the perceived severity of the crime increases, individuals considering punishment are more likely to

attribute criminal behavior to personal factors of the offender than to situational factors (Fukami & Hopkins, 1993). This suggests that individuals considering punishment of violent and sexual offenders are more likely to attribute the criminal behavior to personal factors of the offender and favor stronger forms of punishment.

***Prior criminal history.*** After the severity of the crime is taken into consideration, the prior criminal history of the offender is the next most influential variable in determining punishment (Hough et al., 2009). Research has demonstrated that individuals are more punitive toward offenders with previous convictions, and even more punitive if the offender has been previously convicted of a related crime (Brocke et al., 2004; Hough et al., 2009).

The perceived relevance of prior criminal history to punishment is exemplified by the adoption of three-strike laws and the Criminal Justice Act (CJA) of 2003, which allows for the admission of prior criminal history as evidence during the punishment phase of an offender's trial (Easton & Piper, 2008). Furthermore, the CJA requires prior criminal history to be considered in terms of the number of previous convictions, as well as the nature, and recency of the convictions (Hough et al., 2009).

Crime severity and prior criminal history have been shown to influence punitiveness independently (Hough et al., 2009; Dozier, 2009), but how these two variables interact to influence punitiveness toward subsequent crimes has been less studied. The present study investigates the effects of various prior criminal histories on punitiveness toward a subsequent non-sexually motivated crime. Based on research that indicates an increasingly high level of punitiveness toward sex offenders, it is hypothesized that individuals previously convicted of a sexual offense will face stronger punitive attitudes for a subsequent non-sexually motivated crime than individuals previously convicted of a violent offense. Moreover, it is hypothesized



that individuals previously convicted of a violent sexual offense will face stronger punitive attitudes than individuals previously convicted of a violent offense or a sexual offense.

### **Punitiveness Toward Sex Offenders**

Research has called for the need to study punitiveness toward sex offenders in order to better understand the complexities and extent of the punitive attitudes that they face (Griffin & West, 2006). The majority of attitudinal research involving sex offenders has focused on public attitudes toward recidivism and rehabilitation while less research has been applied to specifically researching punitiveness toward sex offenders (Rogers & Ferguson, 2010). A major issue in punitive research of sex offenders is whether sex offenders should be viewed as a specialized population of criminals. Simon (1997) contends that sex offenders are not necessarily a specialized population of criminals, but Becker & Murphy (1998) argue that sex offenders differ from non-sexual criminal populations in that the nature of their crime causes individuals to differentiate sex offenders from other non-sexual criminals.

More recent studies indicate that individuals may distinguish sex offenders from other criminals when forming punitive attitudes. Dozier (2009) surveyed 1,427 randomly selected college students and found that they were more punitive toward individuals committing sexual offenses than to individuals committing non-sexual offenses, such as burglary, drug sale, or drug possession. Results from Rogers and Ferguson (2010) study of 637 individuals including undergraduate college students, APA practicing therapists, and psychologist members of the Association for the Treatment of Sex Abusers also indicate that sex offenders face stronger punitive attitudes than offenders of non-sexually motivated crimes. Dietz & Sissman (1984) found potential jurors to be more punitive toward child molesters than individuals convicted of first-degree murder, and Champion (1988) demonstrated that judges and prosecutors categorize

sex offenders as a unique subset of criminals. These punitive views can have significant implications for the punishment of sex offenders. Payne et al. (2004) suggests that the behavior of members of the criminal justice system is likely to be reflective of their punitive attitudes.

Punitiveness toward sex offenders at the legislative level has increased dramatically in recent years with the mandating of harsher prison sentences, sex offender registration statutes, community notification statutes, and the state authorization of civil commitment (Harvard Law Review, 1996). These legislative acts are similar to “sexual psychopath” laws targeting mentally ill sex offenders in the 1930’s that allowed involuntary civil commitment. These laws were rarely used and would eventually dissolve a few decades later (Pratt, 2000). Additionally, these recent acts of sex offender-specific legislation are reflective of a “punitive zeitgeist” (Levesque, 1995), “new penology” (Simon, 1997), or “new punitiveness” (Pratt, 2000) that is less focused on rehabilitation than with the control, management and punishment of offenders.

Presser and Gunnison (1999) contend that community notification statutes, in particular, serve as a type of “shaming” punishment. Rogers and Ferguson (2010) further note that recent media exploitations of sex offenders, such as television shows like *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (Baer, 2000), *Crime Scene Investigation* (Zuiker, 1999) and *To Catch a Predator* (Bartel, 2004) also promote that shaming of sex offenders. A study of newspaper publications on sexual offenses in New Zealand found that over the course of a year, there was an average of one report on a sexual offense per day (Thakker & Durant, 2006). It is unclear whether exploitive media or sex offender specific news coverage directly influences punitiveness toward sex offenders, but it is reasonable to conclude that it could lead individuals to unfavorably distinguish sex offenders from other offenders.

## Measuring Punitiveness Toward Sex Offenders

A challenge in measuring punitiveness toward sex offenders is that community members may in fact hold inaccurate assumptions about sex offenders that could potentially impact the validity of their self-reported attitudes (Levenson, et al., 2007). Additionally, when comparing punitiveness toward sex offenders and punitiveness toward other offenders, the crimes should be matched in some way (Rogers and Ferguson, 2010). Rogers and Ferguson (2010) also contend that the use of highly salient or emotionally charged phrases such as “forcible rape” and “sexual assault” can potentially prime schemas that are associated with moral outrage or elicit prior punitive associations, so these should be avoided if possible.

**CATSOS.** The Community Attitudes toward Sex Offender Scale (CATSOS) is specifically designed to measure public attitudes toward sex offenders. Prior to the development of the CATSOS, most attitudinal research pertaining to sex offenders depended on attitudinal scales designed for other specific target populations and simply substituted the term “sex offenders” where the original target population was in question (Church et al., 2008).

Balow and Conley (2008) administered the CATSOS to 120 probation/parole officers of the Montana Department of Corrections with several interesting results. When presented with the statement, “People who commit sex offenses should lose their civil rights (e.g., voting and privacy)”, 41% of the participants reported that they *probably agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed* with the statement. Additionally, when presented with the statement, “The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes”, 94% reported that they *probably disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed* with the statement. Finally, when presented with the statement, “Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison”, 18% reported they *probably agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed* with the statement.

These findings could be interpreted as a reflection of the “punitive zeitgeist” (Levesque, 1995), “new penology” (Simon, 1997), or “new punitiveness” (Pratt, 2000) that was previously discussed as being focused on the control, management, and punishment of offenders.

Even though the findings of Balow and Conley (2008) are compelling, there were some limitations to the study. Foremost, using a sample of correction officers could possibly have yielded biased results since probation and parole officers spend so much time working with offenders that their attitudes might be skewed when compared to the rest of the population. Another limitation of the study is that demographic variables of the participants were not assessed to test for their predictive ability of punitiveness toward sex offenders. In addition to crime severity and prior criminal history of the offender, prior research has identified several potential demographic predictors of punitiveness. Identifying what demographic variables, if any, predict punitiveness toward sex offenders is an additional objective of the present study.

### **Demographic Variables Predicting Punitiveness**

Punitive attitudes are based on the expression of moral judgment and the reasoning of an individual enforcing punishment (Easton & Piper, 2008), so it is reasonable to assume that demographic variables of the individual determining punishment are likely to influence their punitive attitudes toward an offender. The challenge of understanding how demographic variables relate to punitiveness is best described by Langworthy and Whitehead (1986), “The complex interactions of demographic variables and intervening attitudinal variables make it difficult at best and erroneous at worst to try and predict punishment attitudes from demographic characteristics alone” (p. 586).

Despite the challenge set forth by Langworthy and Whitehead (1986), research indicates that there are several relationships between a wide range of demographic variables and punitive

attitudes. These demographic variables include political ideology, education, gender, religiosity, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the effects of prior victimization.

**Political ideology.** Recent research shows that there is a positive relationship between a conservative political ideology and punitive attitudes toward offenders, with high levels of conservatism related to higher punitiveness (Applegate et al., 2000; Borg, 1997; Chiricos et al., 2004; Costelloe et al., 2002; Dozier, 2008; Falco, 2008; Hogan et al., 2005; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986; Mackey & Courtright, 2000; Rogers, 2009; Unnever et al., 2005). Political party affiliation in United States has also been shown to influence punitiveness, as individuals who identify with a Democratic ideology are more likely to be supportive of rehabilitation and less likely to be supportive of capital punishment in comparison with individuals that identify themselves as Republican or Independent (Applegate et al., 2000). Research suggests, however, that when measuring political ideology as a predicting variable of punitiveness, it is more effectively measured using a scale of liberalism and conservatism instead of through party identification (Applegate et al., 2000; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998).

**Gender.** Research on the relationship between gender and punitive attitudes has provided mixed results with many studies showing women to be more punitive than men (Cohn, Barkan, & Halteman, 1991; Haghighi & Lopez, 1998; Miller et al., 1986; Tsoudis, 2000), other studies claiming men to be more punitive than women (Applegate et al., 2002; Evans & Adams, 2003; Schwartz et al. 1993; Spratt, 1999), and even some studies showing there to be no relationship at all between gender and punitiveness (Applegate, et al., 2000; Applegate, Cullen, Link et al., 1996; Chiricos et al., 2004; Mackey & Courtright, 2000; Sims, 2003). One consistently demonstrated difference between genders that has been found in several studies is that women

are less supportive of capital punishment than men (Applegate et al., 2000; Cullen et al., 2000; Unnever et al. 2005; Sims, 2003).

In regard to sex offender-specific punitiveness, Falco (2008) found no difference between the punitiveness of men and women toward sexual offenses such as rape and child molestation, but women were shown to be less punitive than men toward non-sexually motivated crimes such as burglary, drug sale, and drug possession. Valliant et al. (1994) found that undergraduate college female students, regardless of their academic year, felt that sex offenders should be incarcerated for at least two years for their first offense in addition to subsequent parole and indefinite treatment after their release.

**Religiosity.** In researching punitive attitudes, religiosity has often been viewed in terms of religious fundamentalism, with an observed positive relationship between religious fundamentalism and punitive attitudes (Grasmick & McGill, 1994; Leiber, Woodrick, & Roudebush, 1995). Religious fundamentalism is viewed as a continuum, and research shows that an individual with higher levels of religious fundamentalism is likely to be more punitive (Evans & Adams, 2003). Additionally, individuals who practice a more compassionate religion are more likely to be supportive of treatment and rehabilitation as opposed to incarceration, and individuals who believe in a more punitive God are in-turn, more punitive (Applegate et al., 2000). Basic practices of religion have also been observed to influence punitive attitudes; individuals attending religious services as frequently as once per month have demonstrated reduced levels of punitiveness compared to those who do not attend religious services at all (Roberts & Indermaur, 2007).

**Education.** Several studies have shown that education has a direct negative relationship with punitiveness (Applegate et al., 2000; Chiricos et al., 2004; Costelloe et al., 2002; Grasmick &

McGill, 1994, Hogan et al., 2005; McCorkle, 1993; Schwarz et al., 1993; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997; Roberts & Indermaur, 2007). Many studies have also investigated the relationship between knowledge of criminal justice and punitive attitudes, but these studies have yielded mostly insignificant results (Courtright et al., 2005; Courtright & Mackey, 2004; Farnworth et al., 1998; Roberts & Indermaur; Falco, 2008). Farnworth et al. (1998) assume that students majoring in criminal justice typically aspire to hold positions where they can influence criminal policy so it is important to understand how their attitudes toward punishment may differ from other college students. Collett & Childs (2009), however, contend that research using hypothetical crime scenarios can be generalized to all college-educated individuals.

**Age and ethnicity.** Older individuals have been shown to be more punitive than younger people (McCorkle, 1993; Leiber, Woodrick, & Roudebush, 1995), but that relationship has been challenged by other studies with contradicting results (Finley & Schindler, 1999; Grasmick & McGill, 1994; Kury & Ferdinand, 1999). Similarly, ethnic minorities have been shown to be less punitive than Caucasians toward acts of social deviance (DeLisi, 2001), but other studies have also shown ethnic minorities to be more punitive than Caucasians (Jackson & Ammen, 1996; Mears, 2001). Evidently, further research is required to identify possible relationships between age and ethnicity to punitiveness.

**Socio-economic status (SES).** Kaukinen and Colavecchia (1999) conclude that SES is a predictor of general public attitudes, but prior research investigating the relationship between SES and punitiveness has produced mixed results. Mears (2001) found that higher reported income was associated with increased punitiveness toward drug offenses, but this finding does not necessarily translate to increased punitiveness toward sexual offenses.

**Prior victimization.** It is suggested by Flanagan et al. (1985), Langworthy & Whitehead (1986), and Falco (2008) that individuals may be reluctant to report prior victimization; therefore, many studies fail to find a significant relationship between prior victimization and punitiveness. Additionally, Taylor et al. (1979) found that public attitudes are a result of environmental factors as opposed to individual experiences with crime. However, Dozier (2009) found a significant relationship between prior victimization and punitiveness toward burglary, and Applegate et al. (2002) found that victimized females are more punitive than victimized males. Sprott and Dobb (1997) contend that the effects of prior victimizations are complex and that not all victims should be viewed as homogenous. Furthermore, Sprott and Dobb (1997) found victims of violent crimes and sexual crimes to be less punitive than non-victims with the exception to victims of burglary. As well as finding no relationship between punitiveness and prior personal victimization, Payne et al. (2004) found no relationship between punitiveness and prior victimization of a family member.

### **Objectives of the Present Study**

The primary objective of the current study is to determine the effects of prior criminal history on an observer's punitive attitudes toward a subsequent violent crime. It is hypothesized that violent offenders, sexual offenders, and violent sexual offenders will all face stronger punitive attitudes than an offender with no prior criminal history. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that sexual offenders, and to an even greater extent, violent sexual offenders, will face stronger punitive attitudes than violent offenders for a subsequent violent yet non-sexually motivated crime, such as assault.

A secondary objective of the study is to determine what, if any, demographic variables are significant predictors of punitiveness toward sex offenders. Based on the findings of Dozier



(2009), Rogers and Ferguson (2010), and Falco (2008), it is hypothesized that there is a direct relationship between conservative political ideology and punitiveness toward sexual offenders. Based on the research of Mears (2001), it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between family income and punitiveness toward sex offenders. Roberts and Indermaur (2007) found an inverse relationship between religiosity and general punitiveness, so it is hypothesized that there is an inverse relationship between religiosity and punitiveness toward sex offenders. Based on the research of Valliant et al. (1994), it is hypothesized that women are more punitive than men toward sexual offenders. Due to the inconsistent findings between age and ethnicity and their respective relationships to punitiveness, it is unclear whether there will be any relationships between age and gender and punitiveness toward sex offenders.

Based on the findings of Langworthy and Whitehead (1986), it is hypothesized that there is a direct relationship between prior victimization and punitiveness toward sexual offenders. Langworthy and Whitehead (1986) also found that individual's whose neighbors had been victimized were more punitive toward sex offenders, so it is hypothesized that participants whose family members have been victimized will also be more punitive toward sexual offenders.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

#### **Participants**

The sample (n=160) was obtained through convenience sampling by surveying four introductory psychology courses at the University of Texas-Pan American. Professors who were willing to offer extra course credit to students who participated in the study determined the course sections used in the study.

#### **Procedure**

At the beginning of a regular class period on a day chosen by the professor, students were introduced to the experimenter and given a short description of the nature of the experiment. Students were informed that participation in the experiment was completely voluntary and that the information collected would be completely anonymous, so they should not leave any traces of identifiable information such as names or student identification numbers.

After signing and returning informed consent forms, participants signed their name on a sheet of paper for compensation by the course instructor, and picked up a packet that contained, in consecutive order: (a) one of four versions of the manipulated hypothetical crime scenario, including a seven-item questionnaire intended to measure punitiveness toward the offender in the scenario; (b) a shortened version of the CATSOS, and; (c) a demographic survey. Participants were randomly assigned because group membership was determined by the order in which participants returned their informed consent forms and it is in this order that they picked up their

packets. Additionally, the packets were collated sequentially, so every participant received a different packet than the three participants before them and the three participants after them. To further maintain anonymity, the packets were collected separately from the informed consent forms.

### **Hypothetical Crime Scenario**

The hypothetical crime scenario was constructed to be as brief and realistic as possible with only the prior criminal history of the offender in each scenario being manipulated among groups. A hypothetical crime of assault was used due to its non-sexual nature while still being considered as a crime against a person.

The hypothetical crime scenario was described to all participants in the following way:

“Two men were recently involved in a fight inside a nightclub located downtown in which one of the men was hospitalized overnight as a result of his injuries. After a police investigation was conducted, the other man involved in the fight was arrested and charged with assault”.

The arrested man was then described as having been convicted of a violent offense (Appendix A), a sexual offense (Appendix B), a violent sexual offense (Appendix C), or as an individual with no prior criminal history (Appendix D).

### **Crime Scenario Reactions Scale (CSRS)**

Each crime scenario was followed by a seven-item crime scenario reactions scale (CSRS) that was created by the experimenter to measure participants' punitiveness toward the arrested man in the scenario. Statements on the CSRS were constructed based on the concepts of punitiveness provided by Courtright & Mackey (2004), Matthews (2005), and Falco (2008). The CSRS was identical among groups except for item seven, which asked the participant if they

thought that the offender should be punished more severely for his prior criminal history. In the case of the offender with no prior criminal history, the item was rephrased to ask the participant if they thought that the offender should be punished less severely for having no prior criminal history.

### **Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (CATSOS)**

The original CATSOS scale was created to measure a broad range of attitudes toward sex offenders including attitudes of social isolation, capacity to change, severity/dangerousness, and deviancy (Church et al., 2008). A shortened version of the CATSOS (Appendix E) was administered using seven items from the CATOS that appeared to specifically measure punitiveness toward sex offenders based on the concepts of punitiveness provided by Courtright & Mackey (2004), Matthews (2005), and Falco (2008).

### **Demographic Survey**

A demographic survey (Appendix F) was also administered to each participant to gather information from the sample, including gender, age, ethnicity, education major, religion, degree of religiosity, and socioeconomic status (SES). Additionally, participants were asked if they themselves, or any of their immediate family members, had previously been convicted of or been the victim of a violent or sexual offense.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Analyses**

Data were analyzed using SPSS software version 17.0. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to detect reliable differences among experimental groups based on responses to the CSRS. The Bonferroni-corrected alpha level for each individual significance test was .006 for an overall alpha of .05 across all pairwise comparisons. Also, standard linear regression employing the least squares criterion was used to investigate possible relationships between demographic variables and punitiveness toward sex offenders based on responses to the CATSOS.

#### **Reliability of Psychometrics**

Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to determine inter-item reliability for both the CATSOS and the CSRS. Of the original seven-item CSRS, items 1 and 4 were removed after multiple researchers expressed an opinion that they only indirectly measured punitive attitudes and their negative effect on the CSRS coefficient alpha. Item 1 of the CSRS stated "The man charged with assault did not intend to cause physical injury to the man that was hospitalized". This statement seems to measure the intent of the offender rather than the punitive views of the participant toward the offender. Item 4 of the CSRS stated "The hospitalized man is partially to blame for his own injuries". This statement also does not directly measure punitiveness toward the offender; rather it seems to measure whether the participant feels both men involved should

be responsible for the incident. After these two items were removed from the CSRS, the resulting coefficient alpha for the scale was .715. With all seven items of the CATSOS retained, the coefficient alpha value of this scale was .706.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The sample included one hundred-and-two females (64%) and fifty-eight males (36%). One hundred fifty-three participants (96%) identified themselves as Hispanic, and the average age of the participants was 19.85 years ( $SD = 3.24$ ). Only six participants (4%) were majoring in criminal justice while eighty-eight participants (55%) were majoring in health related studies, twenty participants (13%) were majoring in math or science, eighteen participants (11%) were majoring in psychology, twelve participants (8%) were majoring in art, eight participants (5%) were majoring in education, six participants (4%) were majoring in business studies, and two participants (1%) were undeclared majors. One hundred forty-three participants (89%) claimed to be at least somewhat religious, and ninety-one participants (57%) described themselves as Catholic. Eighty-eight participants (55%) identified themselves as liberal and seventy-two participants (45%) identified themselves as conservative.

Only eleven participants (7%) reported being the victim of a violent offense and twelve participants (8%) reported being the victim of a sexual offense. Furthermore, only one participant reported having been convicted of a violent offense and no participants reported having been convicted of a sexual offense. When participants were questioned about prior victimizations of family members, thirty-eight participants (24%) reported that an immediate family member had been the victim of a violent offense and nineteen participants (12%) reported that an immediate family member had been the victim of a sexual offense. When participants were questioned about prior convictions of family members, seventeen participants (11%)

reported having a family member who was previously convicted of a violent offense and only five participants (3%) reported having a family member who was previously convicted of a sexual offense.

### **Inferential Statistics**

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a marginally significant effect of punitiveness among experimental groups toward the offender in each scenario  $F_{(3,156)} = 2.55, p = .058$  (Table 1, Figure 1). Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons revealed a significant difference between punitiveness toward violent sexual offenders and offenders with no prior criminal history ( $p < .006, \alpha = .05$ ) (Table 2).

Items 3 and 4 of the demographic survey, which surveyed college major and ethnicity, respectively, were omitted from the regression analysis because only six participants (4%) identified themselves as criminal justice majors and the sample was almost completely Hispanic (96%). Additionally, items 12 and 13 of the demographic survey, which surveyed prior convictions of the participants, were omitted from the regression analysis due to the fact that only one participant reported having been convicted of a violent offense and there were no participants who reported having been convicted of a sexual offense. Age, political ideology, religiosity, income, prior victimizations of the participants and their family members as well as prior convictions of the participants' family members were entered into the regression analysis as predictors of responses to the CATSOS. None of these variables were significant predictors of punitive attitudes toward sex offenders (Table 3).

A t-test to compare punitiveness toward sex offenders between males and females found that there was no significant difference between genders ( $t_{158} = 1.214, p > .05$ ). A second

ANOVA determined that there was no significant difference in punitiveness toward sex offenders between religions ( $F_{3,118} = 1.39, p > .05$ )



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Findings**

The most interesting finding of the current study was that violent sexual offenders were the only type of offenders who faced significantly stronger punitive attitudes than offenders with no prior criminal history for a subsequent non-sexually motivated crime, such as assault. This finding suggests that individuals possibly distinguish between sexual offenders and violent sexual offenders when forming punitive attitudes. A possible conclusion is that the compounding effects of violence and sexual schemata may elicit stronger punitive attitudes than just violence or sex alone.

A secondary finding of the study was a failure to identify any demographic variables as significant predictors of punitive attitudes toward sex offenders. A likely explanation is that there were too many variables entered into the regression or that some of the variables entered into the regression did not have enough variability. Another probable conclusion is that the CATSOS scores were not reflective of the actual attitudes of the participants or that the CATSOS scale was not an accurate measurement of punitiveness toward sex offenders. It is also possible that participants misunderstood the CATSOS statements or the Likert scale itself.

One last null finding worth discussing is that there was no significant difference between punitive attitudes toward sexual offenders and violent offenders, a finding that has been found in previous studies. This null finding suggests that although sexual offenders may face stronger

punitive attitudes than violent offenders for their crimes, this punitiveness may not extend to subsequent crimes.

### **Legal Implications**

Although the Criminal Justice Act (CJA) of 2003 allows for the admission of prior criminal history as evidence during the punishment phase of an offender's trial (Easton & Piper, 2008), it is ultimately left to the judge or jurors to determine the severity of an offender's prior criminal history and how it will influence punishment of a subsequent crime. Evidence from the current study suggests that violent sexual offenders may face harsher legal consequences than violent offenders or non-violent sexual offenders for a subsequent non-sexually motivated violent crime, such as assault.

Although previous research has found that individuals are more punitive toward sexual offenders than violent offenders, the present study suggests that there may be limits to the punitive attitudes faced by sexual offenders, specifically in regard toward subsequent nonsexual crimes. Results from the present study also suggest that individuals may be more concerned with recidivism related to prior criminal history, as it was only violent sexual offenders who were punished significantly harsher for a subsequent violent yet non-sexually motivated crime.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A major challenge in studying the relationships between demographic variables and punitiveness is ensuring that the sample represents diversity among the variables. However, the fact that the sample was a considerably young, predominantly Hispanic group of college students is seen as both a strength and limitation of the study. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other groups or cultures but also allows the results to generalize well to Hispanic college students. The present study also had very few participants with prior convictions or

victimizations. It is likely that there was not enough variance to produce a significant effect size for either of these variables.

Another strength of the present study can be seen in the alpha scores of the Crime Scenario Reactions Scale and the shortened version of the CATSOS that had alpha scores of .715 and .706, respectively. These alpha scores suggest that the statements in the CSRS were targeting similar yet independent concepts of general punitiveness and that the statements in the shortened version of the CATSOS were targeting similar yet independent concepts of sex offender-specific punitiveness.

### **Future Research**

In addition to distinguishing between violent and non-violent sexual offenders, future research of punitiveness toward sex offenders could also benefit from distinguishing between sex offenders whose victims were minors or adults. Sex crimes involving children could potentially produce a much stronger reaction from participants and give greater insight to the determinants of punitiveness toward sex offenders.

Future similar studies could also benefit from using different hypothetical crime scenarios for other crimes than assault or changing the demographic information of the offender in terms of gender, age, or length of time since the actual offense to determine if these variables can influence punitiveness toward sex offenders.

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Table 1

*Comparison of CSRS Means*

	df	F	Sig
Between Groups	3	2.55	.058
Within Groups	156		
Total	159		

Table 2

*Post-Hoc Multiple Comparisons of CSRS Means*

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)
No History	Violent	-.325
	Sexual	-.290
	Violent Sexual	-.600*
Violent	No History	.325
	Sexual	.035
	Violent Sexual	-.275*
Sexual	No History	.290
	Violent	-.035
	Violent Sexual	-.310
Violent Sexual	No History	.600*
	Violent	.275
	Sexual	.310

\*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Table 3

Table 3

*Predictors of CATSOS Responses*

Variable	CATSOS Responses		
	Model 1 B	Model 2	
		<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	2.888		[1.92, 3.85]
Age	.022	.091	[-0.02, 0.06]
Income	.016	.028	[-.07, 0.11]
Religiosity	.052	.174	[0.01, 0.33]
Conservatism	.171	.076	[-0.06, 0.16]
Victim of a violent crime	.304	.099	[-0.20, 0.81]
Victim of a sexual crime	.108	.037	[-0.39, 0.60]
Victim of a violent crime *	.381	.209	[0.02, 0.75]
Victim of a sexual crime*	-.570	-.237	[-1.04, -0.10]
Convicted of a violent crime*	-.088	-.035	[-0.56, 0.38]
Convicted of a sexual crime*	-.088	-.020	[-0.88, 0.71]
<i>R</i> <sub>2</sub>	.088	.027	
<i>F</i>	1.44		

Note. N=160, CI = confidence interval, \* =victimizations and convictions of family members.

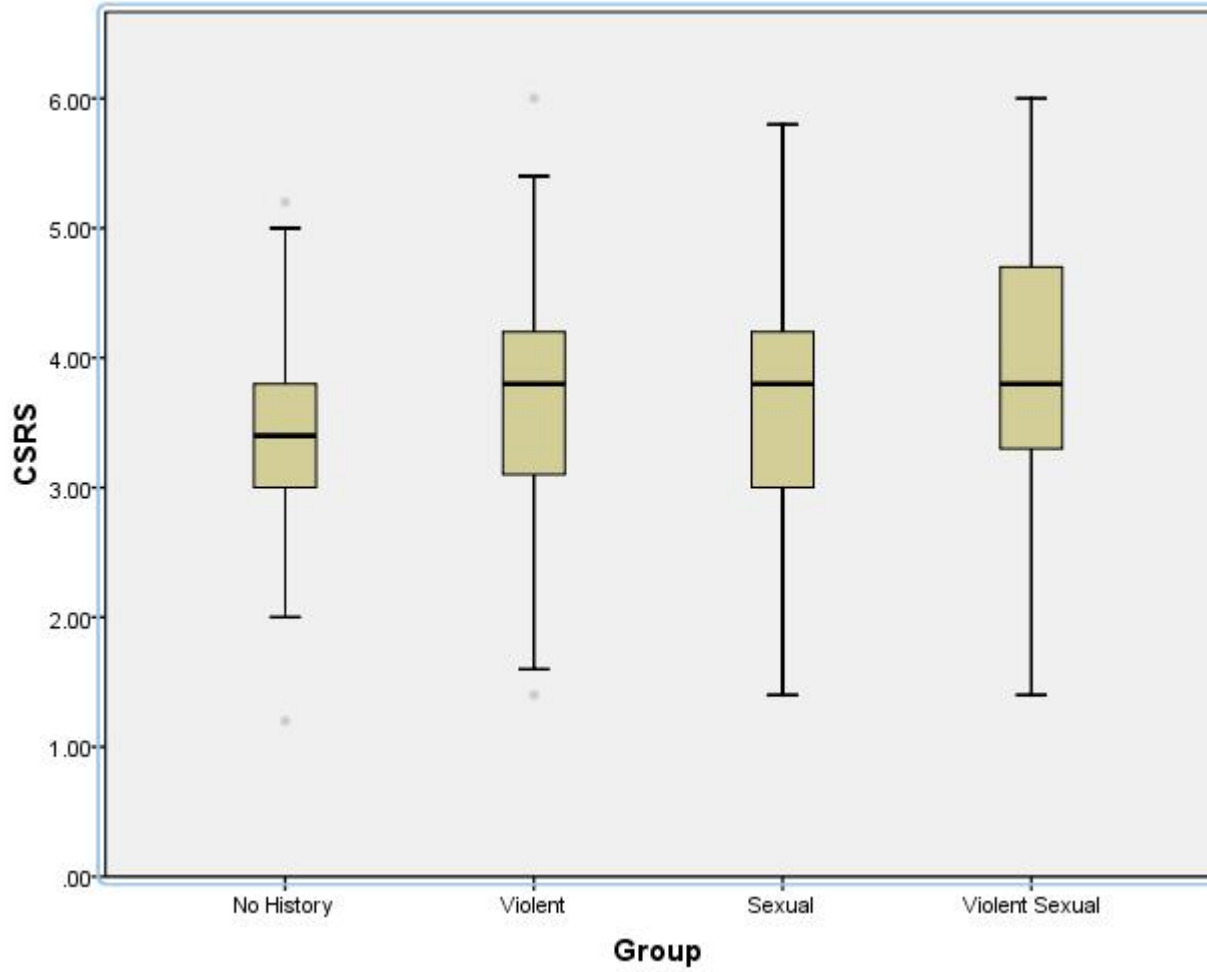


Figure 1. Box plot of CSRS means among groups

## APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### HYPOTHETICAL CRIME SCENARIO WITH THE OFFENDER HAVING BEEN PREVIOUSLY CONVICTED OF A VIOLENT OFFENSE AND ATTACHED CRIME SCENARIO REACTIONS SCALE (CSRS)

*Two men were recently involved in a fight inside a nightclub located downtown in which one of the men was hospitalized over night as a result of his injuries. After a police investigation was conducted, the other man involved in the fight was arrested and charged with assault. Before this arrest, he had also been previously convicted of a violent offense.*

Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion based on what you have read; thus, we are less interested in the “right” or “wrong” answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions regarding the hypothetical crime scenario. Please provide an answer to each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Probably Disagree	Probably Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

- 1.) The man charged with assault did not intend to cause physical injury to the man that was hospitalized.
- 2.) The man charged with assault is completely to blame for the hospitalized man’s injuries.
- 3.) The man charged with assault should be punished to the full extent of the law.
- 4.) The man that was hospitalized is partially to blame for his own injuries.
- 5.) The hospitalized man should file a civil lawsuit against the man charged with assault.
- 6.) The man charged with assault should have to pay all the medical bills of the man that was hospitalized.
- 7.) The man charged with assault should be punished more severely because he was previously convicted of a violent offense.

## APPENDIX B

## APPENDIX B

### HYPOTHETICAL CRIME SCENARIO WITH THE OFFENDER HAVING BEEN PREVIOUSLY CONVICTED OF A SEXUAL OFFENSE AND ATTACHED CRIME SCENARIO REACTIONS SCALE (CSRS)

*Two men were recently involved in a fight inside a nightclub located downtown in which one of the men was hospitalized over night as a result of his injuries. After a police investigation was conducted, the other man involved in the fight was arrested and charged with assault. Before this arrest, he had also been previously convicted of a sexual offense.*

Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion based on what you have read; thus, we are less interested in the “right” or “wrong” answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions regarding the hypothetical crime scenario. Please provide an answer to each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Probably Disagree	Probably Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

- 1.) The man charged with assault did not intend to cause physical injury to the man that was hospitalized.
- 2.) The man charged with assault is completely to blame for the hospitalized man’s injuries.
- 3.) The man charged with assault should be punished to the full extent of the law.
- 4.) The man that was hospitalized is partially to blame for his own injuries.
- 5.) The hospitalized man should file a civil lawsuit against the man charged with assault.
- 6.) The man charged with assault should have to pay all the medical bills of the man that was hospitalized.
- 7.) The man charged with assault should be punished more severely because he was previously convicted of a violent offense.



## APPENDIX C

## APPENDIX C

### HYPOTHETICAL CRIME SCENARIO WITH THE OFFENDER HAVING BEEN PREVIOUSLY CONVICTED OF A VIOLENT SEXUAL OFFENSE AND ATTACHED CRIME SCENARIO REACTIONS SCALE (CSRS)

*Two men were recently involved in a fight inside a nightclub located downtown in which one of the men was hospitalized over night as a result of his injuries. After a police investigation was conducted, the other man involved in the fight was arrested and charged with assault. Before this arrest, he had also been previously convicted of a violent sexual offense.*

Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion based on what you have read; thus, we are less interested in the “right” or “wrong” answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions regarding the hypothetical crime scenario. Please provide an answer to each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Probably Disagree	Probably Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

- 1.) The man charged with assault did not intend to cause physical injury to the man that was hospitalized.
- 2.) The man charged with assault is completely to blame for the hospitalized man’s injuries.
- 3.) The man charged with assault should be punished to the full extent of the law.
- 4.) The man that was hospitalized is partially to blame for his own injuries.
- 5.) The hospitalized man should file a civil lawsuit against the man charged with assault.
- 6.) The man charged with assault should have to pay all the medical bills of the man that was hospitalized.
- 7.) The man charged with assault should be punished more severely because he was previously convicted of a violent offense.

## APPENDIX D

## APPENDIX D

### HYPOTHETICAL CRIME SCENARIO WITH THE OFFENDER HAVING NO PRIOR CRIMINAL HISTORY AND ATTACHED CRIME SCENARIO REACTIONS SCALE (CSRS)

*Two men were recently involved in a fight inside a nightclub located downtown in which one of the men was hospitalized over night as a result of his injuries. After a police investigation was conducted, the other man involved in the fight was arrested and charged with assault. Before this arrest, he had no prior criminal history.*

Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion based on what you have read; thus, we are less interested in the “right” or “wrong” answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions regarding the hypothetical crime scenario. Please provide an answer to each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Probably Disagree	Probably Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

- 1.) The man charged with assault did not intend to cause physical injury to the man that was hospitalized.
- 2.) The man charged with assault is completely to blame for the hospitalized man’s injuries.
- 3.) The man charged with assault should be punished to the full extent of the law.
- 4.) The man that was hospitalized is partially to blame for his own injuries.
- 5.) The hospitalized man should file a civil lawsuit against the man charged with assault.
- 6.) The man charged with assault should have to pay all the medical bills of the man that was hospitalized.
- 7.) The man charged with assault should be punished less severely because he had no prior criminal history.

## APPENDIX E

## APPENDIX E

### SHORTENED VERSION OF THE COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX OFFENDERS SCALE (CATSOS)

Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion; thus, we are less interested in the “right” or “wrong” answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions. Please provide an answer to each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Probably Disagree	Probably Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

- 1.) People who commit sexual offenses should lose their civil rights (e.g. voting and privacy).
- 2.) The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes.
- 3.) With support and therapy, someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior.
- 4.) Trying to rehabilitate a sex offender is a waste of time.
- 5.) Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.
- 6.) Only a few sex offenders are dangerous.
- 7.) Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison.

## APPENDIX F

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DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1.) Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

2.) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3.) College Major: \_\_\_\_\_

4.) Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

5.) Please select what best describes your political beliefs.

Very Liberal	Liberal	Somewhat Liberal	Somewhat Conservative	Conservative	Very Conservative
1	2	3	4	5	6

6.) Please select what best describes your religious beliefs.

Not Religious	Somewhat Religious	Religious	Very Religious
1	2	3	4

If applicable, what is your religious affiliation?

- Protestant Christian
- Roman Catholic
- Evangelical Christian
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_



7.) Please select your **yearly** family income.

- Less than \$25,000 per year
- \$25,000 - \$50,000 per year
- \$50,000 - \$75,000 per year
- \$75,000 - \$100,000 per year
- More than \$100,000 per year

8.) Have you ever been the victim of a violent offense?

9.) Have you ever been the victim of a sexual offense?

10.) Has anyone in your immediate family been the victim of a violent offense?

11.) Has anyone in your immediate family been the victim of a sexual offense?

12.) Have you ever been convicted of a violent offense?

13.) Have you ever been convicted of a sexual offense?

14.) Has anyone in your immediate family been convicted of a violent offense?

15.) Has anyone in your immediate family been convicted of a sexual offense?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Antonio Zamorano was born and raised in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley. He grew up questioning the logic behind human behavior and soon after graduating high school he knew that he wanted to pursue an academic career in the field of psychology. He received a bachelor of arts in psychology from the University of Texas-Pan American in 2006. With the completion of his master's degree in experimental psychology, he hopes to find a position in higher education where he can share his knowledge with other young students. His permanent mailing address is 5217 N. FM 493 Donna, TX 78537.