

Researchers call for more tailored approach to dealing with different types of sex offenders

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Community attitudes to sex offenders who are in positions of trust—such as teachers, coaches, or clergy members—are significantly

more negative than those towards general sex offenders (SOs) and could lead to reoffending, a new study finds.

The [research](#), [published](#) in the journal *Sexual Offending: Theory, Research, and Prevention* and led by the University of Portsmouth, surveyed 347 community members and discovered that institutional child sex offenders (ICSOs) are viewed more harshly and with a greater desire for social distance than SOs. ICSOs are perceived as violating a deep societal trust, leading to more intense stigmatization.

The study utilized two key tools to measure attitudes: The Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale and the Bogardus Social Distance Scale. Results showed that participants scored higher on the CATSO for ICSOs—indicating more negative attitudes—and expressed a stronger desire for social distance from ICSOs compared to SOs.

Dr. Andy Williams, from the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Portsmouth, explained, "Our findings reveal a significant difference in community attitudes towards ICSOs versus SOs. The stigma associated with being labeled an ICSO is higher, likely due to the perceived betrayal of trust. This highlights the importance of recognizing ICSOs as a distinct subgroup when developing policies to deal with their reintegration to society."

The study points out that institutional child [sexual abuse](#) (ICSA) is a unique form of child sexual abuse (CSA) that has not been sufficiently explored in research, despite its prominence in media coverage. The unique position of trust held by ICSOs, such as teachers or clergy members, who are neither [family members](#) nor strangers, makes this subgroup particularly controversial and stigmatized.

University of Portsmouth Masters student Tiffany Taylor, and co-author

of the study, said, "ICSA cases are particularly troubling for communities because they involve trusted individuals who are expected to protect children. This betrayal amplifies the negative perceptions and desire for social distance."

The findings suggest that the heightened stigma against ICSOs might have unintended consequences. For instance, individuals who feel heavily stigmatized and rejected by their communities may be less likely to seek help or disclose their struggles, potentially increasing the risk of reoffending.

Tiffany Taylor added, "While the community's desire to distance themselves from ICSOs is understandable, this approach might counterintuitively increase the risk of them reoffending. Creating supportive environments for all offenders to seek help and rehabilitation is crucial to reducing re-offending."

The study also emphasizes the need for more nuanced research on different subgroups of sex offenders. Current policies and societal attitudes are often based on broad categorizations that do not account for the complex realities of these individuals' situations.

This research is a call to action for policymakers, [community leaders](#), and researchers to develop more tailored and effective approaches to handling cases involving different types of [sex offenders](#). Understanding the unique dynamics and societal reactions to ICSOs can lead to more informed and compassionate policies that balance community safety with the potential for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Dr. Williams said, "Recognizing the diversity within sex offender categories is crucial. By understanding and addressing the specific stigmas associated with ICSOs, we can work towards more effective prevention and reintegration strategies that protect communities while

supporting positive change."

More information: Tiffany E. Taylor et al, Exploring community attitudes towards people labelled as institutional child sex offenders, *Sexual Offending: Theory, Research, and Prevention* (2024). [DOI: 10.5964/sotrap.14631](#)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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