

David McElhattan Paper Wins International Recognition for Undergraduate Research

Senior David McElhattan's paper, "Sex Offenders, Moral Boundaries, and Community Notification," has won Honorable Mention in the Law and Society Association's international competition for undergraduate research papers. LSA is the world's leading professional association of scholars in all disciplines who do research on the relationships between law, society and human behavior. David, a double major in sociology and philosophy, wrote his paper in the fall of 2009 for the sociology of law seminar taught by Professor Peter Yeager.

This paper explores the latent punitive and boundary-maintaining functions of recent sex offender registry, community notification, and zoning laws. Through a review of literature in the sociology of law, relevant legal scholarship, and secondary statistical data, I demonstrate that the series of sex offender laws passed over the last two decades centers on the statistically rare homicidal stranger. This worst-case scenario, sex crime murder, is perceived as the inevitable culmination of a sex-criminal career. Empirical evidence, drawn from Department of Justice recidivism statistics, undermines this slippery slope thesis. Though clothed as regulatory statutes, recent American sex offender legislation represents an atavistic pillory logic dependent on the structure of modern, complex society. I suggest that the seemingly irrational paranoia over sex offenders lurking in otherwise safe communities may symbolize a more general collective anxiety about the loss of traditional sexual norms.