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Sex offender recidivism

Research summary
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Question

How often do sexual offenders re-offend sexually?

Background

Of all criminal offenders, sexual offenders create the most public concern and attract the most media attention. Consequently, extraordinary measures are often taken to monitor sexual offenders released to the community (special police and probation supervision, community notification, sex offender registries). Knowing how often various types of sexual offenders re-offend would be useful for setting policy to effectively manage sexual offenders.

Method

The present sample (N = 4,724) combines 10 sub-samples ranging in size from 191 offenders to 1,138 offenders. These samples were drawn from jurisdictions in Canada, the United States, England and Wales. The offenders in these samples were followed, post-release, for an average of seven years - some as long as 32 years. Half of these samples used *sexual reconviction* as the recidivism criteria while the other half used *a new charge for a sexual offence*. These samples contained a wide variation in offenders, those with a previous sexual offence on their record and those without, incest offenders, "boy victim" and "girl victim" child molesters, rapists, older offenders, younger offenders, and those who have been offence-free in the community for an extended period.

Answer

When the whole sample was examined, it was found that within the first five years of release, 14% had a new charge or conviction for a sexual offence. This percentage represents an overall average for a mixed group of sexual offenders. In the following five years (between years 5 and 10) an additional six percent (6%) of sexual offenders failed and in the five years following that (between years 10 and 15) an additional four percent (4%) failed. Between years 15 and 20, post-release, an additional three percent (3%) had a new charge or conviction for a sexual offence. After twenty years, 73% of sexual offenders had **not been charged with, or convicted of, another sexual offence in the community.**

In a sub-analysis, offenders were divided into those with a previous sexual offence on their record and those without a previous sexual offence. It was found that offenders who had no previous sexual offence (first time sexual offenders) were significantly less likely to sexually re-offend than those with a previous offence. Offenders with no previous sexual offences recidivated at about half the rate of repeat sexual offenders (19% vs. 37% after 15 years). Additional analyses indicated that "boy victim" child molesters sexually re-offended at a higher rate than rapists who, in turn, recidivated more often than "girl victim" child molesters or incest offenders. It was also found that offenders over the age of 50 re-offended less often than younger offenders. As well, the longer an offender remained offence-free in the community, the less likely they were to re-offend.

Policy implications

1. The level of sexual recidivism in sexual offenders is lower than is commonly believed.
2. Policies based on the assumption that all sexual offenders re-offend at a high rate or that all sexual offenders pose the same recidivism risk may lead to over-supervising lower risk offenders.
3. Actuarial assessment tools can assist in differentiating high-risk offenders from lower risk offenders.

Source

Harris, A., & Hanson, R. K. *Sex offender recidivism: A simple question*. (User Report 2004-03). Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.

For further information

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