

Canada SO Recidivism 03-04

- Three distinct time periods, five years, ten years, and fifteen years, for each of the subgroups examined. The combined group of child molesters (13%, 18%, and 23%). “Girl Victim” Child Molesters - 9%, 13%, 16%.
- Offenders with a prior sexual offence conviction had recidivism rates about double the rate observed for first-time sexual offenders (19% versus 37% after 15 years).
- Most sexual offenders do not re-offend sexually over time. This may be the most important finding of this study as this finding is contrary to some strongly held beliefs. After 15 years, 73% of sexual offenders had not been charged with, or convicted of, another sexual offence. The sample was sufficiently large that very strong contradictory evidence is necessary to substantially change these recidivism estimates. Other studies have found similar results. Hanson and Bussière’s (1998) quantitative review of recidivism studies found an average recidivism rate of 13.4% after a follow-up period of 4-5 years (n = 23,393). In a recent U.S. study of 9,691 sex offenders, the sexual recidivism rate was only 5.3% after three years (Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003).
- The observed recidivism rates in the current study are slightly lower than the lifetime sexual recidivism rates estimated by Doren (1998) - 52% for child molesters and 39% for rapists. Doren’s estimates were largely based on long-term follow-up of highly selected samples (Hanson et al., 1995; Prentky, et al., 1997); in contrast, the current study used larger and more diverse samples, including many low risk offenders serving community sentences. Doren’s (1998) estimates were also based on charges, whereas most of the recidivism data in the current study was based on convictions.
- Most of the offenders in the current study did not receive effective treatment, whereas treatment is currently provided to almost all of the high risk sexual offenders in Canada. Research has found that contemporary cognitive-behavioural treatment is associated with reductions in sexual recidivism rates from 17% to 10% after approximately 5 years of follow-up (Hanson et al., 2002).

- The variation in recidivism rates suggests that not all sex offenders should be treated the same.
- Research has even suggested that offenders may actually be made worse by the imposition of higher levels of treatment and supervision than is warranted given their risk level (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).
- Rather than considering all sexual offenders as continuous, lifelong threats, society will be better served when legislation and policies consider the cost/benefit break point after which resources spent tracking and supervising low-risk sexual offenders are better re-directed toward the management of high-risk sexual offenders, crime prevention, and victim services.