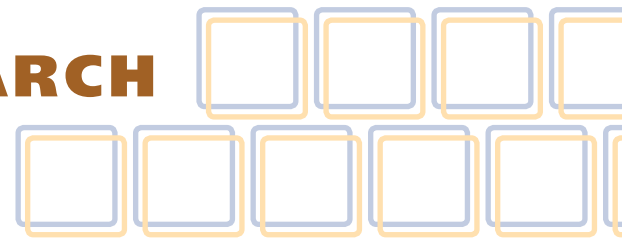




SOMAPI RESEARCH BRIEF

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

Luis C.deBaca, Director • July 2015



Recidivism of Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses

by Christopher Lobanov-Rostovsky

Introduction

Juveniles who commit sexual offenses have come under increasing scrutiny from the public and policymakers over the past 25 years. Previously, this population was not seen as a significant public safety threat and was instead viewed with a “boys will be boys” attitude. However, in a series of studies conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s that featured retrospective sexual history interviews with adult sexual offenders, many adults reported that they began their sexual offending during adolescence (see, for example, Groth, 1977; Groth, Longo, & McFadin, 1982; Longo & Groth, 1983; Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991). These findings led practitioners and policymakers to focus more attention on juveniles who commit sexual offenses as a way to prevent adult sexual offending. Since the 1980s, a significant body of knowledge specific to juveniles who commit sexual offenses has been developed, particularly in relation to the characteristics of these youth and their propensity to reoffend. To accomplish this, researchers employed methodologies very different from those that retrospectively examined the offending history of adult sex offenders. These methodologies enabled researchers to better understand the experiences, characteristics, and behaviors of juveniles who commit sexual offenses, including rates and patterns of recidivism.

This Research Brief addresses recidivism of juveniles who commit sexual offenses. It summarizes what is scientifically known about the topic and identifies policy implications, knowledge gaps, and unresolved controversies that emerge from the extant research and that might serve as a catalyst for future empirical study.

About SOMAPI

In 2011, the SMART Office began work on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management. As part of the effort, the SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and develop summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. These summaries are available online at <http://smart.gov/SOMAPI/index.html>.

A national inventory of sex offender management professionals also was conducted in 2011 to gain insight about promising practices and pressing needs in the field. Finally, a Discussion Forum involving national experts was held in 2012 for the purpose of reviewing the research summaries and inventory results and refining what is currently known about sex offender management.

Based on the work carried out under SOMAPI, the SMART Office has published a series of Research Briefs, each focusing on a topic covered in the sexual offending and sex offender management literature review. Each brief is designed to get key findings from the literature review into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Overall, the briefs are intended to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for sexual offenders and provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization.



Summary of Research Findings

Prospective National Youth Sample That Included Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses

The National Youth Survey is an ongoing longitudinal study that began in 1976. The study has followed over time a nationally representative sample of 1,725 youth who were ages 11 to 17 in 1976, surveying them about their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs regarding a variety of topics, including violence and offending. In the 1992 survey wave (the latest for which relevant sexual offending data were collected), 6 percent of the sample reported having committed a **sexual assault**, which was defined as youth who reported one sexual assault during the first three waves of data collection, and 2 percent of the sample reported having committed a **serious sexual assault**, which was defined as youth who reported two or more sexual assaults during the same time frame. In addition, 70 percent of those acknowledging a sexual offense reported the onset to have been prior to age 18. In terms of recidivism, 58 percent of those youth committing a sexual assault reported committing a subsequent sexual assault. Of the serious sexual assaulters, 78 percent reported committing another serious sexual assault. Finally, in terms of adult sexual assaults, 10 percent of those who committed a sexual assault as a juvenile also committed an adult sexual offense, and 17 percent of those who committed a serious sexual assault as a juvenile also committed an adult sexual offense (Grotpetter & Elliott, 2002).

Large-Scale Systematic Reviews, Including Meta-Analyses

The first meta-analysis synthesized findings from 79 studies between 1943 and 1996. The average sexual recidivism rate for juveniles who had committed sexual offenses was 5 percent for those studies with 1 year of follow-up, 22 percent for those studies with 3 years of follow-up, and 7 percent for those studies with 5 or more years of follow-up (Alexander, 1999).

A second meta-analysis involved 9 studies and 2,986 juveniles who had committed a sexual offense. Based on an average follow-up period of 59 months, the study found a sexual recidivism rate of 13 percent, a nonsexual violent recidivism rate of 25 percent, and a nonsexual

and nonviolent recidivism rate of 29 percent for study subjects (Reitzel & Carbonell, 2006).

The third meta-analysis reviewed 63 studies and a combined sample of 11,219 juveniles who committed sexual offenses. Recidivism was measured over a mean followup period of 59 months. The study found a weighted mean sexual recidivism rate of 7 percent and a weighted mean general recidivism rate of 43 percent for study subjects (Caldwell, 2010).

Single Studies

A number of single studies have examined the recidivism rates of juveniles who have committed a sexual offense. These studies have focused on offender populations from a variety of intervention settings. For example, in some studies the subjects have been released from a correctional institution or residential placement and, in others the subjects have been on community supervision. Since these variations in settings may reflect different levels of risk for recidivism among study subjects, this review reports findings from studies focused on juveniles released from an institutional placement separately from those derived from studies focused on juveniles released from a community-based setting. Rather than presenting findings and study characteristics in narrative form, tables are used to summarize key features of each study's sample and to present sexual and general recidivism rate findings.

In table 1, note that the reported rates of recidivism for juveniles released from a correctional or residential setting varied considerably across studies. Sexual recidivism rates ranged from a low of 0 percent after 1 year of followup to a high of 41 percent after 5 years of followup, whereas general recidivism rates ranged from 23 percent after 3 years of followup to 77 percent after 5 years of followup.

Again, in table 2, the reported rates of recidivism vary across studies. Sexual recidivism rates for the juveniles released from a community-based setting ranged from a low of 1 percent after 18 months of followup to a high of 25 percent after 7 years of followup, whereas general recidivism rates ranged from a low of 7 percent after 1 year of followup to a high of 79 percent after 7 years of followup. These reported rates of recidivism do not vary greatly from the rates of recidivism found for those juveniles released from correctional and residential settings.



TABLE 1: SINGLE STUDIES OF RECIDIVISM RATES FOR JUVENILES WHO COMMIT SEXUAL OFFENSES AND WERE RELEASED FROM CORRECTIONAL OR RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS

Author(s)	Sample Size and Gender	Year(s) of Release or Offense	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism Percent	General Recidivism Percent
Schram, Milloy, & Rowe (1991)	N = 197 M	1984	5 years	12%	51%
Milloy (2006)	N = 21 M	1990–2003	As of Dec. 2005	38	71
Waite et al. (2005)	N = 256	1992–1998	5 years	5	53
Miner (2002)	N = 86 M	1993–1995	4 years	8	47
Barnoski (2008)	N = 319 (305 M, 14 F)	1995–2002	5 years	9	60
Rodriguez-Labarca & O’Connell (2007)	N = 22	2001	5 years	41	77
Garner (2007)	N = 104 (103 M, 1 F)	2004	3 years	2	23
MDJS (2007)	N = 110	2001	1 year	0	38

M = male juveniles; F = female juveniles.
MDJS = Maryland Department of Juvenile Services.

TABLE 2: SINGLE STUDIES OF RECIDIVISM RATES FOR JUVENILES WHO COMMIT SEXUAL OFFENSES AND WERE RELEASED FROM COMMUNITY-BASED SETTINGS

Authors	Sample Size and Gender	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism Percent	General Recidivism Percent
Gretton et al. (2001)	N = 220 M	55 months	15%	51%
Lab, Shields, & Schondel (1993)	N = 155 M	Unknown	3	19
Prentky et al. (2000)	N = 75	1 year	4	7
Rasmussen (1999)	N = 170 (167 M, 3 F)	5 years	14	54
Seabloom et al. (2003)	N = 122 M	18 years	4	NA
Smith & Monastersky (1986)	N = 112 M	29 months	14	35
Vandiver (2006)	N = 300 M	3–6 years after age 18	4	53
Wiebush (1996)	N = 366	18–35 months	4	31–51
Barnoski (1997)	N = 266	18 months	1	17
Nisbet, Wilson, & Smallbone (2005)	N = 303 M	7 years	25	79
Langstrom & Grann (2000)	N = 46 (44 M, 2 F)	5 years	20	65
Rojas & Gretton (2007)	N = 359 M	10 years	12	53
Worling, Littlejohn, & Bookalam (2010)	N = 148 (139 M, 9 F)	16 years	16	NA

M = Male juveniles; F = Female juveniles. NA = Data not available.



TABLE 3: SINGLE STUDIES OF RECIDIVISM RATES FOR JUVENILES WHO COMMIT RAPE AND/OR CHILD MOLESTATION OFFENSES

Authors	Sample Size (Males)	Followup Period	Recidivism of Juvenile Sexual Offenders		Recidivism of Juvenile General Offenders	
			Against Younger Children	Against Peers/Adults	Against Younger Children	Against Peers/Adults
Aebi et al. (2012)	N = 223	4.3 years	5.60%	1.50%	32.60%	45.5%
Faniff & Kolko (2012)	N = 176	1 & 2 years	0	3.33	7.94	30.0
Hagan & Cho (1996)	N = 100	2–5 years	8	10	38	54
Hagan & Gust-Brey (1999)	N = 50	10 years	NA	16	NA	90
Hagan et al. (2001)	N = 150	8 years	20	16	NA	NA
Kemper & Kistner (2007)	N = 296	5 years	8	1	41	46
Parks & Bard (2006)	N = 156	134 months	4	10	32	28

NA = Data not available.

TABLE 4: SINGLE STUDY OF RECIDIVISM RATES FOR JUVENILES WHO COMMIT SEXUAL OFFENSES (SPECIALISTS) AND WHO COMMIT SEXUAL AND NONSEXUAL OFFENSES (GENERALISTS)

Authors	Sample Size and Gender	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism		General Recidivism	
			Specialists	Generalists	Specialists	Generalists
Chu & Thomas (2010)	156 males	57–68 months	10%	14%	24%	46%

Although it is difficult to base firm conclusions on these data, the relative similarity in observed recidivism rates found across different intervention settings indirectly suggests that (1) the risk levels of youth from different settings may not be appreciably different, and therefore (2) appropriate intervention placement based on assessed risk may not have been occurring at the time these studies were undertaken. Given the importance of reserving more intensive interventions and services for high-risk offenders, these hypotheses and their relevance for contemporary sex offender management practice arguably should be tested in a more direct and rigorous manner.

Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the data in table 3, there does not appear to be a significant difference in the rate of either sexual or general recidivism between juveniles who commit sexual offenses against peer or adult victims and those who commit sexual offenses against child victims, based on the results of these studies.

In the Chu and Thomas (2010) study comparing specialists and generalists (see table 4), no significant difference in sexual recidivism was found between the two groups. However, generalists did have a significantly higher rate of general recidivism than specialists. In fact, their rates of both violent and nonviolent recidivism were also significantly higher than the rate for specialists.

On the other hand, comparisons involving juveniles who commit sexual offenses with those who commit nonsexual, general offenses produced mixed results (see table 5). Some studies found that juveniles who commit sexual offenses had significantly higher rates of sexual and general recidivism than their general-offending juvenile counterparts, and others did not. Given the inconsistent findings, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the propensity of one group to recidivate relative to the other.



TABLE 5: SINGLE STUDIES OF RECIDIVISM RATES FOR JUVENILES WHO COMMIT SEXUAL OFFENSES AND WHO COMMIT NONSEXUAL (GENERAL) OFFENSES

Authors	Sample Size and Gender	Followup Period	Juvenile Sexual Recidivism		Juvenile General Recidivism	
			Sexual Offenses	General Offenses	Sexual Offenses	General Offenses
Hagan et al. (2001)	150 males	8 years	18%	10%	NA	N/A
Brannon & Troyer (1991)	110 juveniles	33 months	2	0	32%	16%
Caldwell (2007)	2,029 males	5 years	7	6	74	80
Letourneau, Chapman, & Schoenwald (2008)	1,645 juveniles	4 years	2	3	NA	NA
Milloy 1994	256 males	3 years	0	1	44	58
Sipe, Jensen, & Everett (1998)	306 males	6 years	10	3	32	44
Zimring, Piquero, & Jennings (2007)	3,129 males	4–14 years after adulthood	9	6	NA	NA

Research Limitations and Future Needs

Drawing sound conclusions about the recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses can be difficult due to a number of factors. Because many sex offenses are never reported to law enforcement nor cleared by arrest, the observed recidivism rates of juveniles remain underestimates of actual reoffending. Measurement variation across studies, small sample sizes, short followup periods, and missing information about the characteristics of the sample studied and the interventions study subjects were exposed to, make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the available data.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Key conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical evidence are outlined below. First, the observed sexual recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses range from about 7 to 13 percent after 59 months, depending on the study. Recidivism rates for juveniles who commit sexual offenses are generally lower than those observed for adult sexual offenders. For example, in a 2004 meta-analysis, Harris and Hanson found average sexual recidivism rates for adult offenders of 14 to 24 percent, depending on the followup period. Hence, recidivism data suggest that there may be fundamental differences between juveniles who commit sexual

offenses and adult sexual offenders, particularly in their propensity to sexually reoffend.

Second, a relatively small percentage of juveniles who commit a sexual offense will sexually reoffend as adults. The message for policymakers is that juveniles who commit sexual offenses are not the same as adult sexual offenders, and that all juveniles who commit a sexual offense do not go on to sexually offend later in life. As a result, juveniles who commit sexual offenses should not be labeled as sexual offenders for life, and sex offender management policies commonly used with adult sex offenders should not automatically be used with juveniles who commit sexual offenses.

Finally, juveniles who commit sexual offenses have higher rates of general recidivism than sexual recidivism. This suggests that juveniles who commit sexual offenses may have more in common with other juveniles who commit delinquent acts than with adult sexual offenders, so interventions need to account for the risk of general recidivism. Intervention efforts should be concerned with preventing both sexual recidivism and general recidivism.

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ABOUT SMART

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 authorized the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within OJP. SMART is responsible for assisting with implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals across the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.