Top Ten Series
THINGS ADVOCATES NEED TO KNOW

A key mission of the Center for Research on Violence Against Women is to ensure that the findings of quality research make it into the hands of advocates. This translation of research to practice ensures that science has an impact on the lives of women and children.

In 2010 the Center for Research on Violence Against Women conducted a survey with over 100 rape crisis and domestic violence advocates in Kentucky about what they needed to know from research to help them do their jobs. Advocates identified ten top issues. A series of ten briefs were prepared by the Center to answer the Top Ten Things Advocates Need to Know.

Top ten things advocates need to know

1. What services do survivors of rape find most helpful, and what help do they say they need?

2. **What type of sex offender is most likely to recommit their crimes? Incest offenders, rapists, or pedophiles?**

3. What mental health issues are caused by experiencing intimate partner violence or sexual assault?

4. Do protective orders work? Who violates protective orders the most?

5. What is the impact of mandatory arrest laws on intimate partner violence victims and offenders?

6. What are the most significant long-term health consequences of chronic sexual or physical violence?

7. What percentage of rape cases gets prosecuted? What are the rates of conviction?

8. Does treatment with intimate partner violence offenders work?

9. Does a report of intimate partner violence or sexual assault by a partner put a woman at risk of losing custody of her children?

10. How do women from different racial/ethnic backgrounds experience intimate partner violence (IPV) or sexual assault? Does race and ethnicity matter?

For more information on the Center for Research on Violence Against Women and to find PDFs of the Top Ten Things Advocates Need To Know Series, visit www.uky.edu/CRVAW

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QUESTION 2:

WHAT TYPE OF SEX OFFENDER IS MOST LIKELY TO RECOMMIT THEIR CRIMES?
INCEST OFFENDERS, RAPISTS OR PEDOPHILES?

REPORT AT A GLANCE

- There is little agreement among researchers on how to classify type of offender - by victim, by offender characteristics or other schemes. This report focuses on offender by type of victim.
- Violent, antisocial offenders most often perpetrate rape against adult women, and are the most likely to commit new crimes against a variety of victims.
- These offenders are usually more likely to be re-arrested for a new violent crime than a sex crime.
- Child molesters "fixated" on children have the highest risk of sexual reoffending - this increases with the number of victims they have previously abused.
- Incest-only offenders are the least likely to reoffend, yet incest may be linked to a broader pattern of domestic violence.
- The biggest predictor of reoffending seems to be a history of multiple sexual assaults against multiple victims.
- Mental disorders such as pedophilia, sadism, antisocial personality disorder and a history of violence are linked to repeat sex offending.
- Research is ongoing on how to classify, treat, and understand the risks of future offending associated with different types of sex offenders.

In 2010 the Center for Research on Violence Against Women conducted a survey with over 100 rape crisis and domestic violence advocates in Kentucky about what they needed to know from research to help them do their jobs. Advocates identified ten top issues. This brief is one in a series of ten prepared by the Center to answer these top ten research questions.

Background

Since the 1980s, intense focus has been given to sex crimes committed against women and children. These crimes, by their severity and repetitiveness, have called for increased scrutiny and stronger criminal penalties, tougher policies, and increased public awareness. Today, laws in every state require specific types of sexual offenders to register with state and national sex offender registries.

While a consolidated public policy push has prevailed, the population addressed by these efforts is not homogenous. Criminal offenses committed by individuals grouped together as "sex offenders" include a wide range of activities: pornography, participation in prostitution, statutory rape, indecent exposure, child molestation, forcible rape, sodomy, incest, and online solicitation of sex with minors, to name only a few. Researchers, particularly in the areas of criminal justice, psychology, and psychiatry, have worked for three decades to develop a better understanding of who sexual offenders are, in the process developing and testing several competing classification schemes for grouping and assessing sex offenders. The goal in this scientific work has been to find similarities that can lead to better prevention, risk assessment, or treatment options with this offender population (1).

Who are these offenders?

The study of sex offenders is still a developing, growing, and ever-changing field of research. At present, there is little agreement between researchers about which characteristics are the most important for understanding types of sex offenders. Some schemes classify offenders by type of victim, others by offender characteristics, and other schemes use the circumstances of the offense itself (for example, planned

versus unplanned assaults) (1). There are even multiple, competing risk-assessment instruments used by mental health and criminal justice practitioners to determine a sex offender's competence for release from treatment, prison, or probation whose predictive strengths and weakness are routinely being tested and re-evaluated (2, 3, 4).

There are, however, several facts about sex offenders that find considerable support across multiple research studies. This research review is intended for advocates who may be providing services to survivors of rape, sexual assault, or family violence which may include the sexual abuse of children. Therefore, this report will focus on research findings which describe sex offenders by the type of victim, specifically focusing on the re-offending characteristics of: incest offenders, adult rapists, and non-family child molesters. Doing so will help to directly connect the experiences of sexual assault survivors whom advocates will assist, with research that can identify the typical risks posed to the survivor or others from the sex offenders they might encounter.

Do They Repeat Their Crimes?

As advocates know, in criminal justice terms recidivism is typically used to discuss a situation where a previously convicted offender is arrested again for a similar offense. Sometimes it is defined broadly (e.g., a new arrest for any reason) and other times recidivism is defined narrowly (e.g., a new arrest for the same offense). Though studies measure recidivism differently, most research on sex offenders makes a distinction between sexual recidivism and non-sexual violent recidivism. This distinction is important because research shows that the motivations for committing different types of sexual crimes are very different.

Studies find that rapists who victimize adult females are more likely to exhibit generally antisocial and violent characteristics, while most non-familial child molesters are non-violent with inappropriate sexual attraction towards children, commonly diagnosed as pedophilia (1, 5). In other words pedophilia, by definition, is about sexual attraction to inappropriately young people, while rape is usually about controlling or hurting others (1, 4, 6).

It is important to note however that many incarcerated offenders, particularly antisocial or violent offenders, admit to having victimized multiple types of targets including related children, non-related children and also adults (7).

In a large study of 4,673 Canadian sex offenders, Hanson (8) found that incest child molesters were the least likely to sexually reoffend. Others studies have found similar recidivism rates within these categories (see Table below).

In a study by Serin et al. (9), rapists are more often re-arrested for committing non-sexual violent offenses, while child molesters were more likely to reoffend with another sexual crime.

In a study tracking 9,691 male sex offenders released from U.S. prisons in 1994, Langan, Schmitt, and Durose (10) found that 5.3% of released sex offenders (517 offenders) were re-arrested for a sex crime within 3 years of release.

RECIDIVISM RATES OF VIOLENT OR SEXUAL CRIMES AMONG CONVICTED SEX OFFENDERS

	Hanson (8)	Serin (9)	Langan (10)
Rapists (adult victim)	17.1%	29.4%	18.7%
Child molesters	14.4%	16.2%	14.1%
Incest offenders	*8.4%*	*4.4%*	-
Non-family child molesters	*19.5%*	*11.8%*	-

How Often Do They Reoffend?

Most research attempting to predict repeat offending among sex offenders is based on small samples of only a few hundred cases, because arrest for sexual recidivism has what is called a "low base rate" of re-offending. This is a statistical problem which, put simply, means that arrest for sexual re-offending among convicted sex offenders occurs so infrequently that it is generally more accurate to predict that no one will re-offend than to try to predict which specific individuals will re-offend (3, 11). Obviously, such a prediction is unacceptable and many research studies have attempted to predict re-offenders despite this substantial hurdle. Research has yet to

definitively identify the best measures to predict who will reoffend, though many possibilities have been explored (2). At present, it appears that the best predictor of sexual recidivism is a history of re-offending: the more sexual crimes an offender has committed, the more likely that offender will continue to do so (12, 13, 14, 15, 16). Most studies of repeat sex offending track only previously convicted sex offenders, recording whether or not they are re-arrested for additional sex offenses. For example, in the Langan, Schmitt, and Durose (10) study of 9,691 convicted sex offenders described above, 71.5% of sex offenders had only one conviction.

Interviews and surveys of convicted sex offenders suggest that sex offenders may commit 2-5 times as many offenses as they are arrested for (11, 17).

Measures of repeat sex offending are almost certainly under-estimates, since recidivism statistics rely on new sex offenses being discovered, resulting in an arrest, and occurring within a limited timeframe (usually 3 years) after release (11). This underestimation is particularly likely among rapists, because research shows that only 14-18% of rapes are even reported to the police, let alone result in an arrest (18).

Several research studies have found that younger age at time of release is predictive of a higher likelihood of re-offending (2, 5, 17). However, this same research also shows that rapists are typically younger than child molesters when released from prison or treatment. Combined with the finding that rapists more often exhibit general antisocial characteristics (1), and are more likely to be re-arrested for a violent rather than sexual offense (9), it is likely that the effect of older age in lowering recidivism among sex offenders

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may be due to the fact that criminal offending behavior decreases with age for all criminals, regardless of the type of crime (19). However, Barbaree and colleagues (2) recently found that while aging decreases the ability of antisocial violence measures to predict re-offending, it actually increases the ability of sexual deviance measures to predict re-offending. In effect, they found that all re-offending decreases as a person ages, but that offenders with sexual paraphilias are more likely than antisocial rapists to reoffend at an older age. Woessner (6) also categorizes similar offenders as "socially and mentally unremarkable offenders" who typically commit their offenses under extreme life stressors and have a low risk or recidivism. Research data generally supports that incest-only offenders are the least likely to reoffend after an initial arrest (8, 9).

Does Domestic Violence Matter?

A study of 476 sex offenders by Stalans, Hacker, and Talbot (4) found a direct link between sexual recidivism and an offender's history of partner battering.

Sex offenders with a history of domestic violence were more likely to commit another sex offense than individuals with a history of violence against non-family members, both while on probation (26.4% vs. 15.1%) and after (19.0% vs. 11.2%).

Domestic batterers in this study were also far more likely to be re-arrested for non-sexual crimes than non-batterers (65.5% vs. 44.1%). Interestingly, individuals with no history of violence were the least likely to sexually re-offend (7.9%). Other studies have linked domestic violence to incest sex offending. A study by Wood (20) found that sex offenders without serious mental disorders or violent criminal histories had more instances of domestic violence and incest child abuse.

Does Violence Matter?

Research has found that sex offenders who did commit new violent or sexual offenses were more likely to have certain characteristics than those who did not reoffend.

In addition to being younger, re-offenders were more likely to be violent to their victims and have a history of violent behavior (12, 14), and were less likely to be in a relationship or have stable housing or employment (21, 16, 22, 23). One study found that violent offenders who re-offended were more likely to have reported using alcohol before committing their crimes, but that non-violent offenders who re-offended were more likely to report *not* using alcohol before the crime (4).

Interestingly, a recent study comparing sex offenders who registered with authorities, to those who failed to register as sex offenders found that unregistered sex offenders were no more likely to commit a new sexual offense (24). Much like other research, this study also found that offenders who fail to register are more likely to be young, minority, have more violent charges, and more often have adult rather than child victims.

Conclusion

The study of recidivism among sex offenders is a challenging and controversial area of research. While there are many studies investigating this topic, there is still much debate as to the best ways to screen and predict re-offending by convicted sexual offenders. However, research generally shows that there are many different "types" of sex offender. Violent, antisocial offenders most often perpetrate rape against adult women, and these offenders are the most likely to commit new crimes against a variety of victims. They are usually more likely to commit a new violent crime than a sex crime, but reoffend much sooner after release than child sex offenders. Child molesters who are "fixated" on children (typically diagnosed as pedophiles) have the highest risk of sexual reoffending which increases with the number of victims they have previously abused. Incest-only offenders are the least likely to reoffend, and incest may be linked to a broader pattern of domestic violence.

However, many sex offenders admit to sexually assaulting adults, related children, and non-related children such that any person put in a position of vulnerability around certain types of offenders is at risk regardless of who their previous assaults were against. The most reliable predictor of reoffending for sex offenders seems to be a history of multiple sexual assaults against multiple victims. Some recent research suggests that sex offenders released from custody or treatment at a younger age are more likely to reoffend, and less likely to do so as they get older, but this pattern is true of all criminal offending. Mental disorders such as pedophilia, sadism, antisocial personality disorder, and in particular a history of violence, are all linked to repeat sex offending. Currently, research is still ongoing within prison and treatment settings to classify, treat, and understand the risks of future offending associated with different types of sex offenders.

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