

Recidivism and Reoffense Rates of Adult Sex Offenders

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Introduction

The rate of recidivism among adult sex offenders seems to be a controversial topic. Understanding recidivism is important in deciding how best to devote resources to treating and managing offenders and yet some statistics appear to suggest that recidivism rates are quite low while others suggest that they are high.

In order to understand what the research tells us, it is first important to understand the distinction between *recidivism rates* and *reoffense rates*. *Recidivism* refers to detected or officially recorded sex crimes while *reoffense* refers to all sex crimes regardless of whether they have been detected or officially recorded.

Reporting Sex Crimes

Researchers appear to agree that recidivism rates underestimate reoffense rates (see *Hanson, Morton and Harris, 2003*). This is probably because many or even most sex crimes go unreported.

Victims Under-Report

Various surveys and research projects have been conducted over the years on the frequency with which victims of sexual assaults report their experiences. Researchers estimate that somewhere between 64% and 99% of sexual assaults are never reported by victims and most studies indicate that fewer than 16% of sex offense victims eventually report their crimes (*Abel and Rouleau, 1990; Besserer and Trainor, 2000; Bolen and Scannapieco, 1999; Cardarelli, 1998; Elliott, 1994; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, and Turner, 2003; Freyd, Putnam, Lyon, Becker-Blease, Cheit, Siegel, and Pezdek, 2005; Kaplan, 1985; National Victims Center and Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, 1992; Ringel, 1997; Russell, 1983; Snyder, 2000*).

In Colorado, it is estimated that 84% of sexual assault cases are never reported to law enforcement (*Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 1998*) and the authors of one study concluded that only 1% of sex offenders' crimes were officially reported to authorities (*Abblmeyer, Heil, McKee, and English, 2000*).

Perpetrators Under-Report.

A number of studies have shown that sex offenders disclose in treatment or in surveys that they committed large numbers of offenses before they were first caught or arrested.

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In one of the first large scale studies of sex crimes, Gene Abel and his colleagues reported that adult sex offenders who were guaranteed anonymity disclosed having committed an average of 533 sex offenses over a 12-year period before being detected (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, and Rouleau, 1988; Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, and Murphy, 1987). The researchers concluded that “arrest records of paraphiliacs do not provide a reliable indication of the true scope of paraphilic acts” and that “most paraphilic acts are not reported”.

In another study, it was found that rapists given assurances that their responses would remain anonymous reported having six times as many victims as could be identified from official records and each of the child molesters in the study reported having hundreds of previously unknown sexual contacts with children (Weinrott and Saylor, 1991). The authors concluded that there is an “iceberg of undocumented offenses beneath the tip of official records”.

A Colorado study reported that adult sex offenders who were known to have an average of 2 victims at the time of their arrest subsequently report having an average of 184 victims after taking polygraph tests while in treatment (Ablmeyer, et al., 2000).

Another study found that child molesters eventually report, while in treatment, having committed an average of 88 crimes each (Underwood, Patch, Cappelletty, and Wolfe, 1999). Other researchers have reported that the number of sex offenses disclosed by sex offenders in treatment increased by 3-4x (Emerick and Dutton, 1993) or by 5x (Janes, 1993) following polygraph testing.

Delay in Detection.

It has been estimated that, on average, 10 to 16 years elapses between a sex offender’s first sex offense and his first arrest (Abel, et al., 1988; Abel, et al., 1987; Ablmeyer, et al., 2000). Between 10 and 20 years may elapse between the time an incest victim is first assaulted and the time he or she reports the abuse (Lamb and Edgar-Smith, 1994; Resler and Wind, 1994).

Recidivism Rates.

Most studies focus on recidivism rather than reoffense because recidivism is easier to study. What does the research tell us about recidivism rates? I surveyed 47 recidivism studies of adult sex offenders conducted since 1980 (37 individual studies and 10 meta-analyses; a small number of studies of adolescents were present in some meta-analyses). I do not claim to have reviewed all studies; I have no doubt missed some studies but I reviewed those that were readily accessible and I included all I found. I endeavored to report the findings of all studies I surveyed as accurately as possible. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this survey is not, in and of itself, a research study and it has not been subjected to peer review; it is simply my attempt to survey the literature as best as I could.

The results of the survey are presented in the figures below. Figure 1 represents recidivism rates reported in individual studies and Figure 2 represents recidivism rates reported in meta-analyses. Each “dot” represents a group of offenders (child molesters, rapists, or a mixed group of offenders) tracked by a

study for a certain number of years or an average number of years for the meta-analyses. (Many studies involve more than one group or time interval so there are more “dots” than studies.) The size of each “dot” on the graph corresponds to the number of subjects in the study. Recidivism in these studies most commonly refers to simple re-arrest or reconviction rates but in some cases statistical procedures such as survival analyses were used; I did not try to analyze the appropriateness of each measure but simply relied upon the authors’ judgments that the measures were accurate portrayals of recidivism within the limits of their studies. (A key for identifying which studies contributed groups at each tracking year is found at the end of this article.)

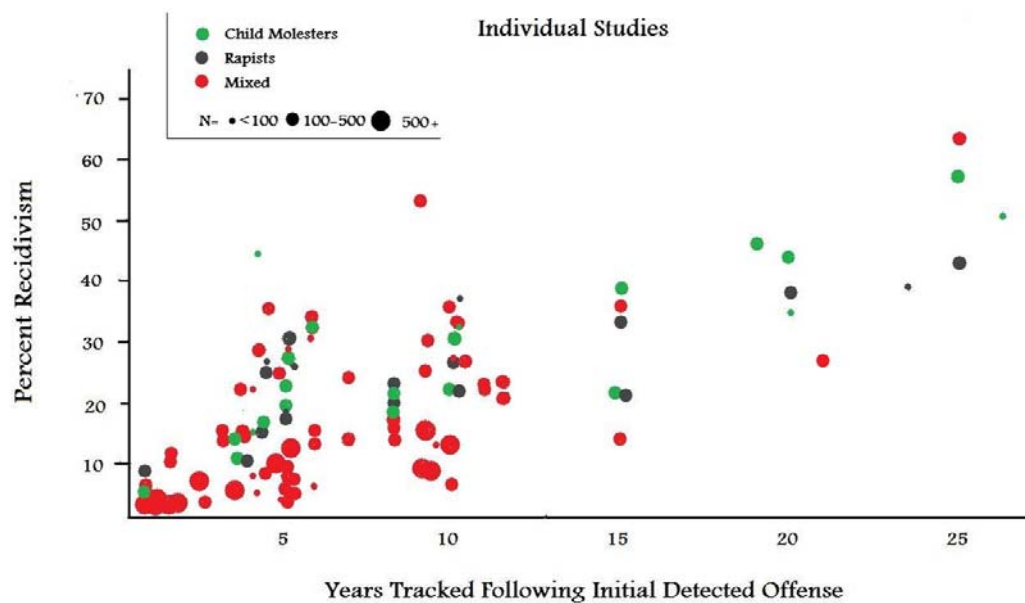


Figure 1

As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), when arrest records are examined over brief periods of time (1-5 years), many researchers, but not all, find relatively low recidivism rates among adult sex offenders. For example, a study conducted by the Minnesota Department of Corrections found recidivism after one year to be 3% (*Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2007*) and the United States Department of Justice reported recidivism after 3 years to be 5% (*Langan, Schmitt, and Rose, 2003*). Another group found average recidivism rates of 4% after 5 years (*Schmietzer and Dwyer, 2003*). According to my calculations, a total of 26 groups of offenders out of 58 (45%) had recidivism rates of 10% or less if tracked for 5 years or less. However; 15 groups (26%) had recidivism rates of 21% or higher.

When researchers track offenders for longer periods of time, recidivism rates increase. Only 15 of 58 groups of offenders (26%) had recidivism rates of 21% or greater when tracked for 5 years or less but that 21 of 40 groups of offenders (53%) had recidivism rates of 21% or greater when tracked for 6 to 15 years.

As researchers track offenders for even longer periods of time, recidivism rates increase more noticeably. Of the 19 groups of offenders in our survey tracked for 11 years or more, none had recidivism

rates below 10% and only 4 groups of offenders (21%) had recidivism rates of 20% or less. Eight of 9 groups of offenders tracked for 16 years or longer had recidivism rates greater than 30%.

In the few individual studies in which offenders are tracked for over 21 years, recidivism rates are almost always higher than rates found after 5 or 10 years. One study found recidivism for a mixed group of offenders after 21 years to be 25% (Cann, Falshaw, and Friendship, 2004); it is worth noting that these authors concluded that a 5-year follow-up period “was not indicative of levels of sexual reconviction at 21 years”. Another study found recidivism for a mixed group of offenders to be 48% after 28 years (Hanson, Steffy, and Gauthier, 1993), another found recidivism to be 39% for rapists and 52% for child molesters after 25 years (Prentky, Lee, Knight, and Cerce, 1997), and another found recidivism for a mixed group of offenders to be 61% after 25 years (Langevin, Curnoe, Federoff, Bennett, Langevin, Pever, Pettica, and Sandhu, 2004).

Some studies had larger sample sizes than others (as represented by the size of the “dot”). Large sample sizes usually mean more accurate findings. The majority of sample sizes ranged from 100-500 subjects per group although there were more large sample sizes in studies with shorter follow-up periods. 81% of groups consisted of 100 subjects or more and 15% consisted of more than 500 subjects when tracked for 5 years or less. 82% of groups consisted of 100 subjects or more when tracked for 11 years or more but no groups consisted of more than 500 subjects when tracked for 11 years or more.

As illustrated in [Figure 2](#), most meta-analyses report recidivism rates ranging from about 10-30% over an averaged follow-up period of about 5 years. For example, one often-quoted study found the average recidivism of sex offenders to be between 13% and 17% after an average of 4 years (Hanson, Gordon, Harris, Marques, Murphy, Quinsey, and Seto, 2002). Another frequently cited meta-analysis found recidivism to be between 13% and 19% after an average of 5 years (Hanson and Brussiere, 1998) and a very recent study found recidivism to be 12% over an average of 6 years (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2009). However, one meta-analysis reported recidivism rates at several different time intervals (Hanson, et al., 2003) and found recidivism to increase steadily over time (from 14% at 5 years to 27% at 20 years) mirroring what appears to be a trend seen in individual studies.

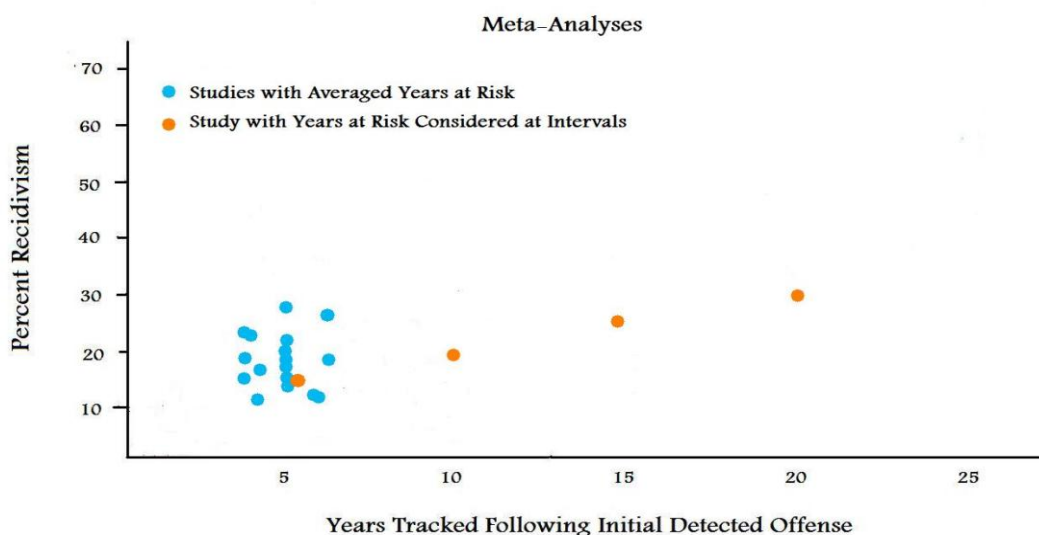


Figure 2

Some groups in both the individual studies and meta-analyses received treatment prior to being at risk for recidivism and while other groups received no treatment. [Figure 3](#) presents recidivism rates for those individual studies which made direct comparisons, as best as I could determine, between treated and untreated groups (child molesters, rapists, and mixed groups of offenders are combined).

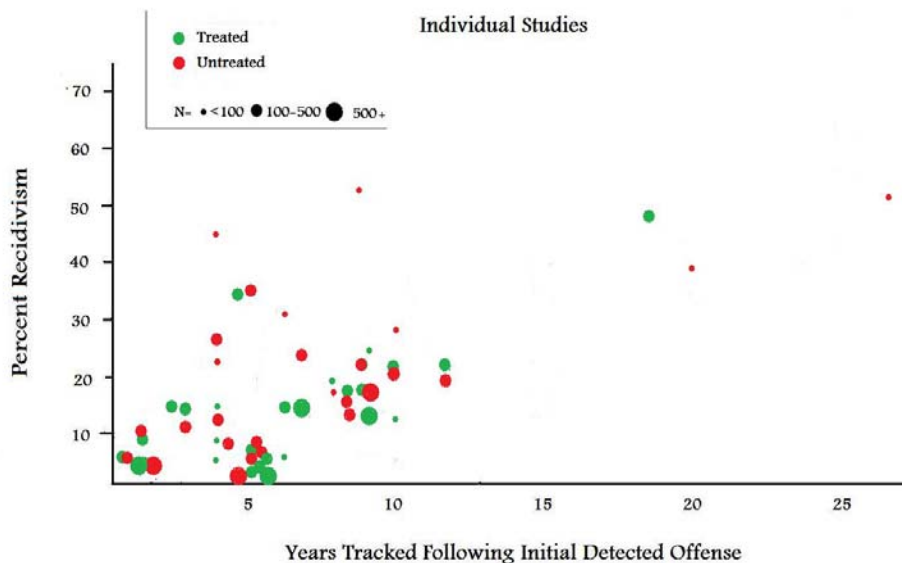


Figure 3

[Figure 4](#) presents these recidivism rates for the meta-analyses.

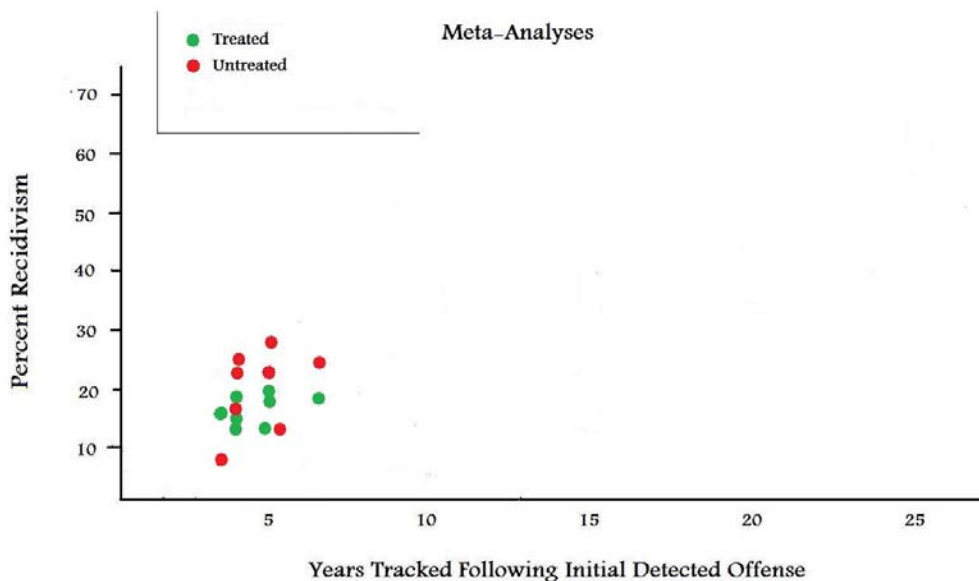


Figure 4

Recidivism Rates vs. Reoffense Rates

As was noted earlier, because sex crimes often go unreported, recidivism rates derived from arrest records can be expected to under-estimate the actual number of sex offenses committed by adult sex offenders.

Hanson et al., (2003) noted that recidivism rates observed in research studies are “minimal estimates” and suggested that a “reasonable” estimate would be that actual reoffense rates are at least 10-15% higher than observed recidivism rates.

In Figure 5, I have re-labeled the vertical axis to show what estimated reoffense rates would be if 15% is added to each recidivism statistic reported from the individual studies shown in Figure 1. A horizontal line has been added at the 50% mark.

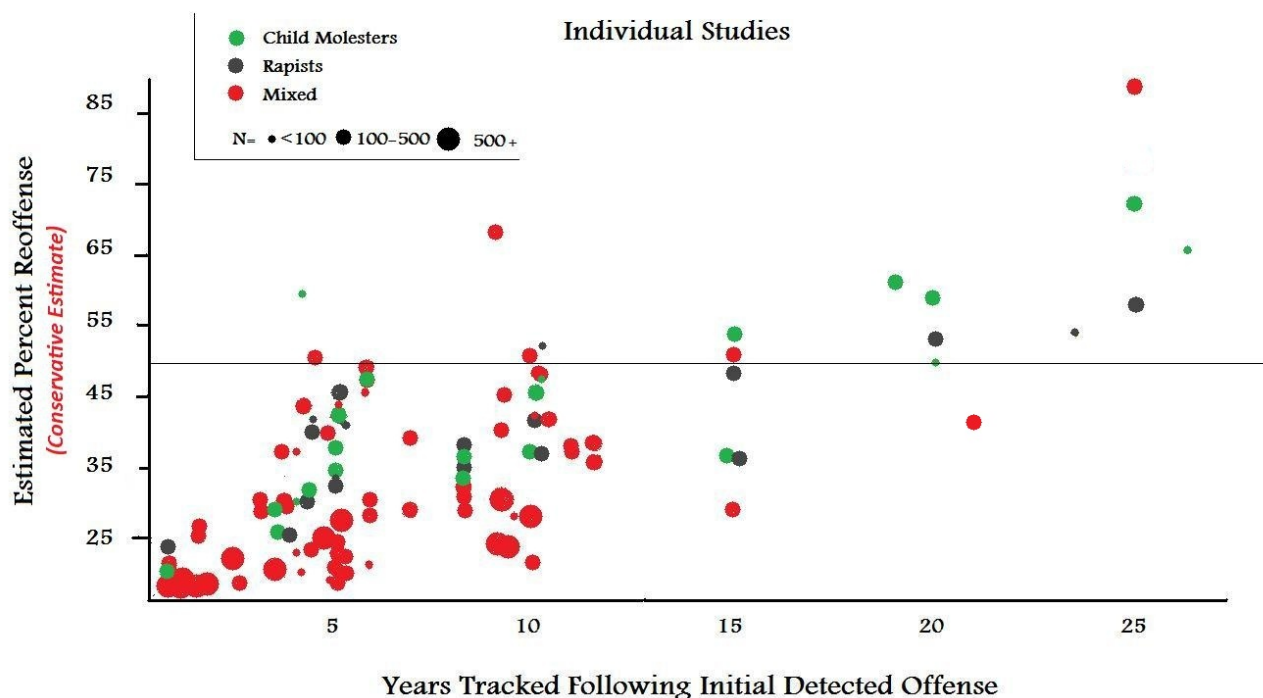


Figure 5

One study surveyed attempted to address under-reporting directly (Langevin, et al., 2004). In this study, reoffense rates among a mixed group of adult sex offenders were estimated to be 88% after 25 years if the self-reports of the offenders are included as a measure of reoffense in addition to official recidivism statistics such as re-arrest records (this “dot” in Figure 5 is placed at 88% but it is placed at 61% in Figure 1 because only recidivism statistics – not self-report – were considered).

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(A letter code indicates that the study is represented in the figures)

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**Studies Represented at Each Tracking Year
(Individual Studies and Meta-Analyses)**

YEAR	STUDY
1	FF,HH,LL
2	J,FF,HH,LL
3	A,I,X,Y,FF,HH,LL
4	C,N,O,EE,FF,LL,MM,OO
5	A,B,D,G,L,P,S,U,V,BB,DD,HH,LL,NN,QQ,RR,TT
6	Q,R,AA,GG,II,PP
7	K,SS
8	FF,TT
9	F,G,H,CC
10	S,X,HH,JJ,KK,LL,TT
11	
12	M,FF
13	
14	
15	S,X,LL
16	
17	
18	
19	T
20	S,T,LL
21	E
22	
23	W
24	
25	Z,LL
26	
27	
28	T