

Re-Offense Rates of Adult Sex Offenders

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Introduction

The rate of re-offending among adult sex offenders seems to be a controversial topic. Some state that the rate is quite low, others that it is quite high.

Sex offenses include both undetected offenses (the crime occurred but was not detected) and detected offenses (those which were reported). It is difficult to ascertain actual re-offense rates since many sex crimes go unreported. Accordingly, researchers must rely on studies of *recidivism* (detected sex crimes).

The following is a review of the literature pertaining to the frequency with which sex crimes are reported or detected and the recidivism rates of adult sex offenders.

Neither perpetrators nor victims tend to report sex crimes.

Victims report only a fraction of sex offenses to authorities.

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 (Ahlmeier, Heil, McKee, and English, 2000).

Many if not most adult sex offenders self report only a fraction of their crimes at the time of their arrest. Many if not most have a long history of committing sex offenses prior to getting caught.

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.

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”.

Others have reported similar findings. For example, one study 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”.

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). Another 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 (Ahlmeyer, et al., 2000). 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.

Sex crimes go undetected for years because neither offenders nor victims tend to report sex crimes.

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; Ahlmeyer, 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).

The re-offense rate for adult sex offenders is high.

Because sex crimes aren’t often reported, recidivism rates derived from arrest records are under-estimates of the actual number of sex offenses committed by adult sex offenders.

Researchers find that recidivism rates steadily increase as offenders are followed for longer periods of time allowing for a greater probability of detection.

Many researchers have found relatively high recidivism rates even when offenders are tracked for short periods of time.

We surveyed 36 recidivism studies of adult sex offenders conducted over the past 19 years (28 individual studies and 8 meta-analyses; a small number of studies of adolescents were present in some meta-analyses). We do not purport to have reviewed *all* studies (several of the meta-analyses cited here, for example, include a greater number of studies) but we believe we have included most of the studies, including meta-analyses, that are the most prominent or frequently cited of recent years.

The results of this survey are presented in the graph below.

As researchers track offenders for even longer periods of time, recidivism rates increase more noticeably. Of the 10 groups of offenders in our survey tracked for 15 years or more, none had recidivism rates below 20% and 5 of 7 groups of offenders tracked for 19 years or longer had recidivism rates greater than 35%.

In the few studies in which offenders are tracked for at least 25 years, recidivism rates are uniformly high. One 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).

Langevin and his colleagues (Langevin, et al., 2004) found recidivism among a mixed group of adult sex offenders to be 88% after 25 years if the self-reports of the offenders are included as a measure of recidivism along with re-arrest records. (This group is not represented as a “dot” in the graph).

Footnotes

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(References with a letter code indicate studies represented in the graph)

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Code For Studies Represented in Graph

<u>Years</u>	<u>Study Code</u>
	(bottom to top)
1	Z, CC, CC, E
2	F, F, Z
3	Q, Z, A, W, W, W, A, A, A, W, A, A
4	V, J, DD, J, C, FF, V, DD, C
5	A, HH, A, B, B, HH, JJ, Z, T, S, I, M, A, CC, I, CC, II, A, A, E, A, II, EE
6	Y, L, AA, K, Y, GG, AA, GG
7	G, G
8	X, X
9	D, JJ, E
10	JJ, Z, M, U, CC, JJ, CC, BB, U
11	
12	H, H, O
13	
14	
15	P, M, P
16	
17	
18	
19	N
20	M, N
21	
22	
23	
24	
25	CC, CC, R
26	
27	
28	N