



SMART

Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

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SOMAPI Report Highlights

Adult Sex Offender Recidivism

Observed recidivism rates of sex offenders are underestimates of actual reoffending.

Sex crimes are one of the most underreported crimes and are often unseen by anyone other than the victim and perpetrator. Low reporting levels make it extremely difficult to estimate actual sexual recidivism rates. Additionally, only a small portion of sex offenses reported to law enforcement result in the offender's arrest. Therefore, it's generally recognized that observed recidivism rates are underestimates of the true reoffense rates of sex offenders.

Sex offender recidivism is difficult to measure.

Recidivism rates are measured differently from one study to the next, with different results. Studies differ in how recidivism is defined (i.e., rearrest vs. reconviction), how long offenders are followed and what types of offenders are included (i.e., rapists vs. child molesters).

Recidivism rates of sex offenders range from 5 percent after 3 years to 24 percent after 15 years.

Relatively low rates are reported in studies using observed sexual recidivism rates over follow-up periods shorter than 5 years. For example, a 2003 study (Langan, P., Schmitt, E., & Durose, M., "Recidivism of Sex Offenders Released From Prison in 1994," Bureau of Justice Statistics) found a sexual recidivism rate of about 5 percent using a 3-year follow-up period for a large sample of sex offenders released from prison. Studies employing longer follow-up periods consistently report higher rates of recidivism. For example, a 2004 study (Harris, A.J.R., & Hanson, R.K., "Sex Offender Recidivism: A Simple Question," Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada) reported sexual recidivism rates of 20 percent and 24 percent for a sample of sex offenders based on a 10-year and 15-year follow-up period, respectively.

Sex offenders — regardless of type — have higher rates of general recidivism than sexual recidivism.

Recidivism studies have consistently found that adult sex offenders have much higher rates of general reoffending than sexual reoffending. A 2004 study (Hanson, R.K., & Morton-Bourgon, K., "Predictors of Sexual Recidivism: An Updated Meta-Analysis," Public Safety and Emergency

Measuring sex offender recidivism is difficult due to underreporting and different methods used in research studies. Studies with longer follow-up periods show that recidivism increases over time. Furthermore, different "types" of sex offenders have different recidivism rates.

Preparedness Canada) analyzed findings from 95 studies and found that sex offenders had an average overall recidivism rate of 37 percent compared to an average sexual recidivism rate of 14 percent, based on follow-up periods of 5 to 6 years. This suggests that policies aimed at protecting the public from sex offender reoffense should be concerned with the likelihood of any form of serious recidivism, not just sexual recidivism.

Female sex offenders reoffend at significantly lower rates than male offenders.

Five- to six-year rates of sexual recidivism for female sex offenders may be as low as 1 to 3 percent. The empirical evidence regarding the different recidivism rates of female and male sex offenders suggests that intervention and management practices need to differentiate between female and male sex offenders, and that methods for assessing risk of male sex offenders are unlikely to be accurate when applied to female sex offenders (Cortoni, F., Hanson, R.K., & Coache, M.È., "The recidivism rates of female sex offenders are low: A Meta-Analysis," Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 22; 2010).

Different types of sex offenders have different recidivism rates.

Research examining the recidivism of rapists and child molesters indicates that the highest observed recidivism rates are found among child molesters who offend against boys. Comparatively lower recidivism rates are found for rapists, child molesters who victimize girls and incest offenders.

The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this summary are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the SMART Office or the U.S. Department of Justice. For more information about SOMAPI and this topic, visit www.smart.gov/SOMAPI.