



Monday, December 17, 2018

It's time to get over it: Risk goes down with time free in the community

By David Prescott, LICSW, & Kieran McCartan, PhD

An extraordinary trend in recent criminological and psychological research, which has gone largely unnoticed in public discussions of policy and practice, is that a person's risk of re-offence goes down the longer they are in the community. Given the very high stakes of public protection, risk management and human rights, it's time these findings receive wider public discussion.

In 2010, Michael Caldwell published a [meta-analysis](#) of studies of juveniles in which he noted that "*Studies that examine sexual recidivism during adolescence find monthly sexual recidivism rates that are more than 4 times higher than those found in studies that rely only on adult recidivism records. Neither the level of secured placement (community, residential, or secured custody) nor the use of arrest versus conviction as an outcome significantly influences sexual recidivism rates*". In other words, adolescents re-offend less as they enter adulthood, which reinforces the criminological research on general recidivism (by leading authors such as [David Farrington](#) and [Terrie Moffitt](#)) and desistance (for example, [Fergus MacNeill](#), [Shadd Maruna](#), and [Beth Weaver](#)).

In 2014, Karl Hanson, Andrew Harris, L. Maaik Helmus, and David Thornton published a [study examining the re-offence rates of adults](#) and found that "*Overall, the risk of sexual recidivism was highest during the first few years after release, and decreased substantially the longer individuals remained sex offence-free in the community. This pattern was particularly strong for the high-risk sexual offender...Whereas the 5-year sexual recidivism rate for high-risk sex offenders was 22% from the time of release, this rate decreased to 4.2% for the offenders in the same static risk category who remained offence-free in the community for 10 years.*"

[Most recently](#), Rachel Kahn, Gina Ambroziak, Karl Hanson, and



Kieran McCartan, PhD
Chief Blogger



David Prescott, LICSW
Associate Blogger

SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.

David Thornton examined 5-year re-offence rates, and – focusing on the lowest risk adults who had sexually abused -- they found that, “*Within this lowest risk category, recidivism rates are equivalent to rates of spontaneous offending among non-offender populations... Adjusted to a common 5-year period, estimated recidivism rates ranged from 0.22 to 5.67% with a median rate of 0.90%. The lowest recidivism rates were observed for the studies that used incarceration as the outcome criteria.*” Kahn and her colleagues also asked, “*If we are to take the Risk Principle seriously, what level of sexual offender-specific treatment should be provided to individuals whose risk is so low that 98 out of 100 would not re-offend if we did nothing?*”

Why is this so important? To start, many professionals working with people who have abused have worked under the assumption that people who abuse are unable or unwilling to change. Ideas such as “there is [no cure](#) for sex offending” were so pervasive as to be written into [statute](#). Indeed, many laws and the findings of the US Supreme Court have been based on the faulty belief that re-offence rates are “[frightening and high](#)”. Despite international [news coverage](#) dispelling this misconception, little has changed. It is vital that evaluators and therapists alike are aware of the importance of time free in the community.

Taking together the findings from elsewhere in the literature, it seems that the most effective means for preventing sexual re-offence lie in active approaches, such as treatment and supervision based in principles of risk, need, and responsivity. Currently, our communities all too often rely on more passive approaches that restrict liberties, such as public registration, notification, and residency restrictions, but these approaches do not reduce risk.

Until our communities and policymakers recognize that the same “rules” and evidence are found across people who offend (and that people who offend sexually are not unique) based on studies now involving hundreds of thousands of criminal offenders, we will continue to funnel resources into policies found to be largely ineffective. Given that knowledge about what works to prevent crime is readily available to these policymakers, it is unconscionable that there has been little, if any, move towards empirically informed policy within our legislatures.

Just last week, we blogged about [international perspectives](#) on the management of people convicted of sex crimes and noted the number of countries that appear to follow the United States’ lead. It’s time to stop this trend and up our game with respect to informing the public about the many ways we can prevent abuse meaningfully.