



Fact Sheet: What You Need to Know About Sex Offenders

This fact sheet highlights key issues related to sex offenses and the management of sex offenders who are under the control of the justice system. It is prepared for members of the public who want to know more about sexual assault, sex offenders, and the role that citizens can play in keeping their communities safe.

What Is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse is:

- unwanted sexual contact between two or more adults or two or more minors;
- any sexual contact between an adult and a minor;
- any unwanted sexual contact initiated by a youth toward an adult; or
- sexual contact between two minors with a significant age difference between them.

Sex crimes can involve physical contact (e.g., unwanted sexual touching) or no physical contact (e.g., Internet crimes).

How Common Are Sex Crimes?

Sex crimes are unfortunately fairly common in the United States. It is estimated that one in every five girls and one in every seven boys are sexually abused by the time they reach adulthoodⁱⁱ. One in six adult women and one in 33 adult men experience an attempted or completed sexual assaultⁱⁱⁱ.

How Many Arrests Occur for Sex Offenses?

Sex offenses represent under 1% of all arrests^{iv}. In 2004, the last year for which official report data were available, there were 26,066 arrests for forcible rape and 90,913 arrests for other sex offenses in the United States^v. Adults account for about 80% of arrests; juveniles for 20%^{vi}. Males account for approximately 95% of arrests^{vii}.

Are All Sex Crimes Reported?

Many victims do not report sexual abuse to authorities because they^{viii}:

- are afraid that their abuser will harm them again;
- do not want to make a very private matter public;
- are worried that they will be blamed for what happened or that they will not be believed;
- feel ashamed;
- feel guilty; and/or
- are embarrassed.

Established in June 1997, CSOM's goal is to enhance public safety by preventing further victimization through improving the management of adult and juvenile sex offenders who are in the community. A collaborative effort of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, the National Institute of Corrections, the State Justice Institute, and the American Probation and Parole Association, CSOM is administered by the Center for Effective Public Policy.



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This means that there are both victims and offenders in the community who have not come to the attention of the authorities. Victims may continue to be in situations that put them at risk and/or are not getting the services they need, while offenders who can potentially be prevented from reoffending are not receiving the support they need to stop.

Who Are the Victims?

Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault, but women and girls are especially at risk. Females are more than six times as likely as males to be victims of sexual assault^x. Children are particularly vulnerable. Approximately 67% of all victims of reported sexual assaults are under the age of 18, and more than half of these victims are under the age of 12^x. Approximately one in four girls and one in seven boys are sexually assaulted before the age of 18^{xi}.

Who Are Offenders Likely to Target?

Most sexual offenses are committed by someone the victim knows — either a family member, friend, intimate partner, or acquaintance^{xii}. About 27% of offenders are strangers^{xiii}.

Who Are Sex Offenders?

There is no such thing as a “typical” sex offender^{xiv}. Sex offenders can:

- be male or female;
- be young or old;
- have different levels of education;
- be married or single;
- have strong ties to their families and communities, or have weak ties; and/or
- have no record of prior criminal involvement or have a record either for sexual or non-sexual offenses.

The reasons why they offend, the kinds of interventions required to help them stop offending, and the risks they pose also vary.

Does Being Sexually Abused Cause Sex Offending?

Not necessarily – some people who commit sex offenses have been victims of sexual abuse themselves, but many have not. Being sexually abused does not cause people to become sex offenders. In fact, most people who have been sexually abused do not go on to sexually abuse others.

What Happens to Convicted Sex Offenders?

The courts impose different sentences depending on the offender, the facts of the case, and the



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state's laws. Some offenders are sentenced to prison or jail, while others are sentenced directly to community supervision (e.g., probation). For those sentenced to prison or jail, some are released on parole or probation supervision while others are released with no supervision.

Approximately 150,000 adult sex offenders are currently in state and federal prisons throughout the United States. Between 10,000 and 20,000 are released to the community each year^{xv}.

Why Do People Commit Sex Crimes?

No single factor or combination of factors can fully explain why someone offends sexually, though some factors may combine to increase people's *tendency* to offend.

These factors are:

- physiological/biological (e.g., imbalanced hormones, being sexually attracted to children);
- sociocultural (e.g., being exposed to broader social messages supportive of aggression);
- developmental/environmental (e.g., having witnessed domestic violence); and
- situational/circumstantial (e.g., having easy access to victims, extreme levels of stress).

How Often Do Sex Offenders Reoffend?

About 12 to 24% of sex offenders will reoffend^{xvi}. When sex offenders do commit another crime, it is more often not sexual or violent^{xvii}. (The figures given may be low because sex offenses are often not reported.)

Are Some Offenders More Likely to Reoffend than Others?

Some offenders are more likely to reoffend than others. Professionals use science-based assessments to estimate the likelihood that someone may reoffend, though these assessments are not guarantees.

What Efforts Are Made to Improve Public Safety When Offenders Are in the Community?

The majority of convicted sex offenders reside in our communities. With proper treatment and supervision, many can live productive and stable lives. Ideally, all sex offenders who go to prison, jail, or detention should have a period of community supervision (probation or parole) following their release to monitor offenders' behavior. If offenders are at risk for reoffending or do not comply with their release conditions, they may be returned to confinement.

The following strategies are being used in managing sex offenders who are under community supervision.



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Providing Specialized Supervision

Convicted sex offenders may be sentenced to probation or parole as a result of a sexual offense, or they may be placed on probation or parole supervision after they have been in prison, jail, or detention. This means that for a period of time (which varies by jurisdiction), offenders report to a supervising officer and must follow specific rules and conditions that limit their behavior. These “conditions of supervision” depend on an offender’s risk level and risk factors. They often include (but are not limited to):

- no contact with victims;
- no or limited contact with minors;
- attending sex offender-specific treatment;
- limited or no Internet access;
- no use of alcohol or drugs;
- restrictions on where they can live and work;
- restricted movement within the community and within and across state lines; and
- reporting to probation/parole officers as required.

Using Surveillance

In some instances, electronic technologies (such as electronic monitoring or GPS devices) help monitor sex offenders while under supervision. Because these technologies are quite expensive and some studies suggest they are most effective with higher-risk offenders^{xviii}, these surveillance techniques may be best used with only the highest-risk or violent sex offenders.

Providing Specialized Treatment

Sex offender treatment can reduce the risk of reoffending^{xix}. The most effective type of treatment approach involves helping offenders change unhealthy thinking patterns, understand factors that are linked to their offending, and develop effective coping skills. For certain offenders, medications, such as those that reduce testosterone, can also be helpful when they are combined with sex offender-specific treatment^{xx}. Treatment may be more effective when it is combined with specialized supervision.

Helping Offenders Deal with Challenges Following Release from Prison

When reentering the community, sex offenders may face many challenges that can cause their lives to be unstable, including^{xi}:

- negative public feelings, including being ostracized or the victims of hostile acts;
- restrictions on where they can live; and
- difficulties finding a job.

This instability can put them at greater risk to reoffend^{xxii}; therefore, working with offenders to deal



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with these challenges is crucial to their ability to live crime-free lives.

Ensuring Offenders Have Suitable Housing

One of the most serious problems that sex offenders face is finding an appropriate place to live. Zoning or residency restrictions and landlords' or homeowners' efforts to keep offenders from moving into their buildings or neighborhoods limit their options. These "safety zones" are found mostly in cities and suburbs — the same places where offenders are most likely to have access to the things they need to be successful in the community, such as jobs, social services, mental health treatment, and transportation.

Understanding Residency Restrictions

Sex offenders who are under community supervision must have their residence approved by their supervising officers to ensure that it is suitable, while sex offenders who are not under community supervision do not have the same restrictions, unless they live in an area with residency restrictions.

Most states have laws that prohibit sex offenders — whether on community supervision or not and whether their crimes involve children or not — from living within 1,000 to 2,000 feet (500 feet in some states) of places where children gather, such as schools and childcare facilities, parks, playgrounds, churches, gyms, swimming pools, libraries, and school bus stops. These zones are often referred to as "child safety zones." Some states and jurisdictions also limit or forbid sex offenders from passing through child safety zones, which means they also cannot travel on certain roads or bus routes.

No research has shown that these restrictions lead to a decrease in sexual reoffending. On the other hand, professionals are concerned that laws that banish or restrict housing options for offenders may eliminate the stability and support that offenders need to be successful in the community^{xxiii}.

Reunifying and/or Living with Children

If offenders who are under community supervision plan to live in the same home as past or potential victims, supervision agencies should first work with other professionals (such as the victim's/family's therapist) on a "reunification" process. Before beginning this process, professionals must determine if the benefits of reuniting outweigh the possible risks to past or potential victims.

Helping Offenders Find a Suitable Job

It is especially important for sex offenders to find appropriate jobs because offenders without stable employment are at a higher risk of reoffending^{xxiv}. Finding suitable employment is a challenge for all offenders who are reentering the community, but it can be particularly difficult for sex



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offenders. Their options can be extremely limited because of concerns about access to potential victims, employers' reluctance to hire sex offenders, licensing restrictions (e.g., for doctors/nurses, teachers, daycare workers, and security guards), and zoning and residency restrictions that limit the geographic area where offenders can work. Community supervision staff typically review and approve employment to make sure that it is suitable. In many instances, they stay in contact with employers or use other means to ensure that offenders are maintaining suitable employment.

What Is the Purpose of Sex Offender Registration?

Sex offender registration is designed to help law enforcement investigate new sex crimes. Law enforcement agencies keep identifying information about convicted sex offenders, such as their names, addresses, photographs, and crimes for which they were convicted. The length of time an offender is required to register varies by jurisdiction (e.g., certain offenders may have to register for ten years, others may have to register for life), and so does the frequency with which the offender must update and verify the information. Recent federal legislation created a national sex offender registry that is intended to assure that all states collect and maintain the same information on convicted sex offenders and provides a single Web site where citizens can find information about registered sex offenders.

What Is Community Notification?

Community notification provides community members access to information about convicted sex offenders. In some cases, community members have to look for the information on their own, for example, on their state registry Web site. In other cases, law enforcement or others inform community members that a sex offender is moving into the area. They may:

- share information in community meetings;
- post fliers in neighborhoods;
- place notices in local newspapers; and/or
- inform residents by going door to door.

How communities are notified and who in the community is notified often depend on the level of risk that an offender presents.

What Should I Know About Juvenile Sex Offenders?

Juveniles who commit sex offenses are not just younger versions of adult sex offenders. They differ in fundamental ways, including how likely they are to reoffend. These differences affect how law enforcement and other professionals manage juveniles to reduce their rate of reoffense.

How Many Juveniles Are Arrested for Sex Offenses?

Juveniles under the age of 18 make up just under 20% of those arrested for sex offenses^{xxv}. Each year, there are approximately 2,200 arrests of juveniles for forcible rape and an estimated 9,200



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arrests of juveniles for other types of sex offenses^{xxvi}. More than 90% of the juveniles who are arrested are male^{xxvii}. Victims are often reluctant to come forward, so the actual number of juveniles committing sexual assault may be higher.

What Is a “Typical” Juvenile Sex Offender?

Just as there is no “typical” adult sex offender, there is no “typical” youth who commits a sex crime. Juvenile offenders can:

- be male or female;
- be from any race or ethnic background;
- be wealthy or poor;
- come from a supportive family or from a family where there has been abuse;
- have mental health or substance abuse issues, or have no mental health or substance abuse issues;
- do well in school or have learning disabilities and experience challenges in school; and/or
- have no history of any type of offense and pose little risk for reoffense, or can have a history of delinquent and/or sexual abuse behavior and require careful management.

Is There a Connection between Exposure to Violence and Sex Offending?

Exposure to physical or sexual violence in the home or community, to particularly aggressive male role models, and to pornography (especially material that is very graphic and violent) can be associated with sexually abusive behaviors among youth^{xxviii}.

How Often Do Juvenile Sex Offenders Reoffend?

Juvenile sex offenders appear to respond better to treatment and reoffend less frequently than adult sex offenders. Sexual reoffense rates for youth over several years are estimated at approximately 10%^{xxix}. In addition, if juvenile sex offenders reoffend, they are far more likely to engage in other types of delinquent behavior than to commit new sex crimes^{xxx}.

Can Juvenile Sex Offenders be Managed in the Community?

In some cases, yes. Placing juvenile sex offenders in custody does not necessarily reduce offending over time. In fact, it can actually increase the likelihood of reoffense as youth who live with other delinquent or troubled juveniles may teach one another how to be even more serious young criminals^{xxxi}. Many juvenile sex offenders can be safely managed in the community with specialized supervision and treatment^{xxxii}.

Is Treatment Important for Juvenile Sex Offenders?

Many juveniles who come to the attention of law enforcement for committing sex offenses do not commit more crimes, even if they do not receive treatment^{xxxiii}. However, juvenile sex offenders



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who do receive treatment have lower rates of reoffense for both sexual and non-sexual crimes^{xxxiv}.

Why Is Community Supervision Important for Juvenile Sex Offenders?

Community supervision (probation or parole supervision) can help ensure that youth behave appropriately in the community, and participate in treatment. Supervision also allows trained officers or case managers to provide support to (and work closely with) parents, school personnel, and others who are responsible for juvenile offenders.

What Other Strategies Are Being Used to Manage Juvenile Sex Offenders?

Many states have laws regarding registration and community notification that apply to juveniles. The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, passed by the United States Congress in 2006, requires that selected (but not all) juvenile sex offenders register periodically with law enforcement and that some data about these youth be posted on the Internet. Like with adult sex offenders, there has been very limited research to date on whether juvenile registration and notification can help reduce reoffending and enhance public safety.

For Additional Information and Resources

CSOM has developed a variety of publications that address in greater depth the range of issues identified in this fact sheet. These documents — along with a number of other tools that have been developed by professionals in the field to aid communities in their efforts to protect themselves and their families and to become a part of the solution to reduce victimization through the effective management of sex offenders — can be found at www.csom.org.

Please contact us with specific questions at askcsom@cepp.com or:

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