

Section 3: Common Characteristics of Sex Offenders

Use Slide 1: Section 3 - Common Characteristics of Sex Offenders

Introduction

In this section, we're going to spend some time considering what the research and practice literature tells us about sex offenders, in terms of some characteristics that they may share as a group overall, as well as some ways in which they differ. Researchers have invested a great deal of effort into exploring these issues so that we may begin to understand or explain why some individuals engage in sexually abusive behaviors, and so that we are better able to make decisions about the kinds of interventions that may be most effective for certain aspects of this population. This has proven to be much easier said than done, however.

The Myth of the “Sex Offender Profile”

Oftentimes, the public wants to know who sex offenders are – or who potential sex offenders might be – based on certain personality characteristics, demographics, or other variables, perhaps because of their understandable desire to be able to “spot” these individuals and take protective measures. In fact, for those who are operating under myths or misperceptions about sex offenders and victimization, they may even believe that all sex offenders fit a certain “profile” that makes them easily identified. For example, you might remember the myth that the typical child molester is a “dirty old man” who hangs out at a park or playground waiting to lure a child away with candy. Or that the typical rapist is a masked knife-wielding man lurking in a dark alley or hiding behind a bush waiting to jump out and grab an unsuspecting woman who is passing by. Those and other similar myths are based on the assumption that sex offenders all “look the same,” so to speak, or that they fit a certain profile.

And for a variety of reasons, even some criminal justice professionals may seek to identify such a profile for sex offenders. For example, law enforcement agents may have the expectation that if there is a profile of the typical sex offender, it might be easier to identify suspects when incidents of sexual assault are reported and the perpetrators have not yet been caught. Some judges and other court actors may hope that a “sex offender profile” exists because it will make decisionmaking easier when these cases are brought to the courts. Still others, such as some treatment providers or some supervision officers, may hold onto the belief that there is a profile of a sex offender, because it will make it simpler to treat and supervise them. And finally, some professionals may believe that if there truly is a profile, we can identify persons who might be at risk of becoming a sex offender and therefore be able to prevent sex offenses from happening to begin with.

 **Use Slide 2: Who is the Typical Sex Offender?**

In reality, however, the research has consistently shown that there is no such thing as a “sex offender profile.” That’s because time and time again, despite attempts to identify a finite and specific set of characteristics that fits for all sex offenders, researchers continue to find that they are a diverse and heterogeneous population.¹ So, although the label of “sex offender” might seem to suggest that individuals who commit these crimes are all alike, that is simply not the case. In fact, because they are such a heterogeneous group, it is sometimes difficult to discern how they are uniquely different from other types of criminals or from those of us in the general public, other than the fact that they have engaged in sexually abusive behaviors.

Do you believe that sex offenders are more similar to other community members than they are different? Why or why not?

Some people have a hard time considering the “similar to us” notion, because it may be easier – or even preferable – to believe that sex offenders are completely and totally different from anyone else, especially from “us.” But let’s remember what the victimization data told us about who these perpetrators tend to be: people we know, including our acquaintances and family members.

Dr. William Marshall, a leading expert in the field of sex offender management, highlighted this very issue in a piece entitled, “The Sexual Offender: Monster, Victim, or Everyman?”² He suggests that in an attempt to separate themselves from sex offenders, people tend to overlook the other qualities and attributes of these individuals and define them only in terms of their abusive and harmful acts. He goes on to provide a brief review of the research literature, which suggests that sex offenders are a diverse group of individuals who may in fact be more similar to us than they are different.

 **Use Slide 3: Sex Offenders Come From All Walks of Life**

To illustrate that point, let’s talk about just a few variables:

- As you have likely experienced in your work, there is no usual age that represents the sex offender – some are young, some are middle-aged, and some are more elderly. It does appear that, within samples of adult sex offenders, older sex offenders recidivate at lower rates than younger adult offenders.³ But we know that people of all ages commit sex offenses, and that a person’s age really doesn’t provide us any insight into whether they might “be” a sex offender.
- Nor can any generalizations be made about where they are most apt to fall along the socioeconomic spectrum or social achievement spectrum. This is

different from other types of crime, whereby socioeconomic status or level of social achievement seems to be a risk factor.⁴

- In terms of intellectual functioning or other functional status, we know that some sex offenders are exceptionally bright, others are “average,” and still others may have significant intellectual limitations. You are probably aware that professionals are challenged considerably to “keep up” with those offenders who are intellectually sophisticated and particularly skilled at manipulation and linguistics. In fact, you may have found yourself having a hard time trying to stay just one step ahead of an offender who seems to have great skill at outsmarting others. At the same time, these same professionals may be equally challenged with respect to how to best tailor strategies and interventions for those offenders whose level of intellectual functioning falls well below the average.
- Although people might argue that an individual must be “crazy” to commit a sex offense, the reality is that most sex offenders are not psychotic or crazy in the truest sense of the word. Some sex offenders have mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, or other disorders, just as many people in the general public do. But that certainly doesn’t cause them to commit a sex offense.
- What about gender? As you saw, although we know that females do commit sex offenses, the vast majority of sex offenders that come to the attention of the authorities are male.⁵

The bottom line is that none of these variables really shed any light on who is more likely to be a sex offender (with the possible exception of gender). People who commit sex offenses come from all walks of life, and in many instances, they often “look” very much like you or me.

Common Characteristics of Sex Offenders

At this point, given the known heterogeneity of sex offenders, some of you may be wondering whether sex offenders share *any* common characteristics that can be helpful for understanding their behaviors. The answer is a qualified “yes.” Researchers have examined multiple factors, traits, and characteristics of large samples of sex offenders, and they have found several issues that seem to be common, at least to broad groups of these offenders.

It is important to remember that not all of these issues are present in every sex offender. Nor does it mean that the presence of any of these variables – either alone or in combination – “makes” an individual a sex offender or necessarily *causes* them to commit sex offenses. Keep in mind that some of these features or characteristics can also be found in samples of other criminals, or within the general population, or even among some of the people in this room! But

because these characteristics have been found in samples of sex offenders, experts believe that they may *somehow* be related to why individuals begin engaging in sexually abusive behavior, particularly when these factors interact with other variables and circumstances. And some, but not all, of these characteristics also predict *reoffending* among known sex offenders.

 **Use Slide 4: Commonly Identified Characteristics**

Deviant sexual arousal, interests, or preferences

For decades, researchers have found that some sex offenders have interests in – or are aroused to – things that are considered to be outside the realm of healthy or appropriate sexual interests or behavior, including, but not limited to, the following:⁶

- Engaging in sexual contact with young children or adolescents;
- Having sexual contact with others against their will or without their consent;
- Inflicting pain or humiliation on others;
- Participating in or watching acts of physical aggression or violence;
- Exposing oneself in a public setting; and/or
- Secretly watching others who are undressing, unclothed, or engaging in sexual activities.

Either through self-report or through the use of certain types of physiological assessment instruments, the presence of some of these and other types of deviant sexual interests or arousal patterns can be identified. Some sex offenders may even *prefer* one or more of these types of behaviors over healthy, consenting sexual relationships with age-appropriate partners – hence, the term deviant sexual preferences. Because these types of interests, urges, arousal, or even preferences can be so strong, it is believed that they are a significant driving force behind the initial onset of sexually abusive behaviors for some sex offenders. Additionally, researchers have found that deviant arousal, interests, or preferences are linked to recidivism.⁷

Remember, though, not all sex offenders actually have evidence of these deviant interests, arousal patterns, or preferences. And there may also be people in the general public who have some types of deviant interests or preferences – but they may not ever engage in sex offending behaviors. Nonetheless, it is an important risk factor for sex offenders.

Cognitive Distortions or Pro-Offending Attitudes

Those who work in this field generally agree that sex offenders are aware that acts such as rape and child molestation are not only illegal but also harmful to others. Yet they engage in this behavior anyway. This is likely the result of cognitive distortions, or pro-offending attitudes. What happens is that sex offenders may tell themselves (and even tell others) that the behavior is not harmful or that it is less serious, or claim that the victim enjoyed the behavior or initiated the sexual contact, or they may come up with justifications for engaging in sex offending behaviors, such as believing that women deserve to be treated in these ways. In so doing, these self-statements give the offenders “permission” to do something that they know is wrong, and therefore they may not feel as badly about themselves for doing it.

The reality is that we all use different types of cognitive distortions to some extent. For example, we may make excuses for driving beyond the speed limit, for “cheating” on a diet, for smoking when one is trying to quit, or for engaging in any other behavior that is problematic, illegal, or otherwise unhealthy. That way, we, too, can avoid feeling guilty or badly about what we are doing. Put simply, the process of using cognitive distortions is not unique to sex offenders. The *types* of cognitive distortions that sex offenders use, however, are often related specifically to their own problem behaviors, including general antisocial behaviors or sex offending behaviors.

Not surprisingly, researchers have attempted to measure these kinds of cognitive distortions among samples of sex offenders, and have found that they are fairly common – and oftentimes to a much greater extent than they are found in other samples of criminals or the general public.⁸ Intuitively, it would seem that these kinds of self-statements that condone or support sex offending behaviors would increase the likelihood that someone would engage in this type of behavior. It also seems logical that cognitive distortions would be related to continued offending. And the research seems to indicate just that – pro-offending attitudes have indeed been found to be associated with recidivism among sex offenders.⁹

Social, interpersonal, and intimacy deficits

Another cluster of characteristics that seems to be fairly common among sex offenders involves problems in the social or interpersonal realm, with issues such as ineffective communication skills, social isolation, general social skills deficits, or problems in intimate relationships; and some experts believe that these characteristics have some role in the development of sexually abusive behavior.¹⁰ And a few of these issues, such as problems establishing and maintaining intimate relationships, are also associated with an increased risk for sexual recidivism.¹¹

Victim empathy deficits

A specific interpersonal problem that is believed to be common to many sex offenders is that of empathy deficits. This concept is about putting oneself in another person's shoes, so to speak, or even feeling what another person may be feeling. For some time it was believed that sex offenders lacked the ability to be empathic in general, although later it was suggested that their deficits were more specific to their victims.¹² While it may not surprise you that victim empathy deficits are common with sex offenders, and that it may be related in part to how individuals are able to engage in sexually abusive behavior, you may be surprised to learn that this specific factor has not been found to predict *recidivism* among sex offenders.¹³

Poor coping or self-management skills

When looking at other descriptive research or literature about sex offenders, a lack of healthy or effective coping skills is often mentioned.¹⁴ For example, some offenders have difficulties managing their emotions appropriately, and some are highly impulsive and tend not to think carefully about the consequences of their behaviors before they act – or they may have difficulty resisting their urges from time to time. We all know that many people in the general public have difficulties managing certain emotions at times, and many of us can and do act in impulsive ways occasionally. So, although these kinds of problems or features are seen commonly among groups of sex offenders, it does not mean that they are *unique* to sex offenders. Nor does it mean that these kinds of variables *cause* people to commit sex offenses. Nonetheless, the research and literature does indicate that some of these factors – specifically emotional and behavioral self-regulation difficulties – may be part of what leads someone down the path to sex offending, and they are also associated with reoffending.¹⁵

Under-detected deviant sexual behaviors

Do you remember the data that we discussed earlier about the range and extent of deviant sexual behaviors that are previously unknown or undetected until after an offender discloses them during an assessment, polygraph, or through the course of treatment? That, too, is a common characteristic of sex offenders. In other words, the research suggests that the offense for which an individual is apprehended may not actually be the first or only abusive behavior in which he has engaged.¹⁶ I am certainly not suggesting that all sex offenders have hundreds of undisclosed victims and that they all engage in every type of deviant behavior imaginable. Rather, as I mentioned earlier, we need to acknowledge that for many sex offenders, there is often more to the story than initially meets the eye.

History of maltreatment

How many of you have heard that most sex offenders have been sexually abused themselves? This is an area that researchers have been interested in for many years with this population.

Indeed, returning to Dr. Marshall's work for a moment, there are some who believe that all sex offenders are victims and, as such, they may even suggest that offenders may be less personally accountable for their own offending behaviors.¹⁷ As Dr. Marshall points out, however, the literature does not support the notion that *all* sex offenders have been sexually abused. Some have been, and some have not.

Among the studies that have examined childhood maltreatment (including sexual victimization) among sex offenders, there is quite a bit of variation.¹⁸ But there does seem to be a relatively high prevalence of sexual or physical abuse among samples of sex offenders. This seems to suggest that there may be some sort of relationship between having been maltreated and later engaging in sex offending behaviors, especially when other kinds of vulnerability or risk factors are present. But in and of itself, there is no research that supports the notion that it actually *causes* sex offending. And we know that there are many people who have been subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse during their childhood or adolescence, yet they never go on to commit sex offenses. You may also find it interesting to know that when researchers have attempted to explore *recidivism* among sex offenders based on a history of sexual abuse, no relationship has been found.¹⁹

Characteristics Associated with Sexual Recidivism

I've mentioned several times that some of these characteristics or factors are believed to be related to why individuals begin engaging in sex offending behavior. And I also noted that some of these characteristics have been found to be correlated with reoffending – or sexual recidivism, though no single variable is powerful enough that we can use just one to try and determine risk. So that you have a clear understanding of the kinds of factors that are related to recidivism, I will highlight them based on the kinds of factors that are static or unchangeable, and those which have the potential to change over time.

Use Slide 5: Key Examples of Static Risk Factors

For example, among other factors, researchers have found the following static factors tend to predict sexual recidivism.²⁰

- A younger age of onset of sex offending;
- Having prior convictions for sex offenses;
- Targeting male victims;

- Having unrelated, unfamiliar victims – as opposed to victims who are within the family or who are known to the offender;
- The presence of deviant sexual interests, or preferences;
- Being unmarried; and
- Having an antisocial personality disorder, or the presence of psychopathy.

 **Use Slide 6: Key Examples of Dynamic Risk Factors**

And in addition, among the kinds of factors or variables that have the potential to change over time, and which predict sexual reoffending, are the following:²¹

- Problems with intimacy, or conflicts in intimate relationships;
- Increased hostility;
- Emotional identification with children;
- Becoming preoccupied with sexual matters or activities;
- Lifestyle instability and self-regulation difficulties, such as employment problems, impulsivity, and substance abuse;
- Attitudes and beliefs that tend to support or justify criminal or antisocial behaviors; and
- Demonstrating non-compliance with supervision or treatment expectations.

Summary: Interpreting Variability Among Characteristics

So, in thinking about some of these characteristics or traits, do you have a clear image for what a typical sex offender “looks like?”

Well, based on what we’ve covered – and perhaps based on your own experiences with sex offenders – many of you may be having difficulty envisioning the one set of characteristics and features that defines the prototypical sex offender and may be saying to yourselves, “There really *isn’t* a typical sex offender.” Which is precisely the point that I discussed earlier. Sex offenders are not all alike.

In fact, even though there are some characteristics that many sex offenders share, it appears that there be more variability – and potential for differences – within the sex offender population overall than there are sweeping similarities. That’s part of what makes sex offender management such a challenge. So although there may be a desire to find the “magic bullet” for treatment, supervision, or even legislation that will fit for all sex offenders, the variability of the sex offender population as a whole makes that impossible.

Does this variability mean that our management efforts are a lost cause? Not at all! More apt to be the case is that different subtypes, subgroups, or typologies of sex offenders exist. And in the next section, that’s exactly what we’ll review.

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By attempting to identify these subtypes or typologies and the common characteristics or features within each of these subtypes, it may be possible to develop more tailored and effective approaches to intervention, rather than attempting to use a single, “one size fits all” approach to managing these offenders.

¹ See e.g., Becker & Murphy, 1998; Chaffin, Letourneau, & Silovsky, 2002; Schwartz, 1995

² Marshall, 1996

³ See e.g., Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Harris & Hanson, 2004

⁴ See e.g., Gendreau, Goggin, & Little, 1996

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005

⁶ See, e.g., Laws & O'Donohue, 1997

⁷ Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004

⁸ Abel, Gore, Holland, Camp, Becker, & Rathner, 1989; Bumby, 1996; Hanson, Gizzarelli, & Scott, 1994

⁹ Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Rice & Harris, 2003

¹⁰ See, e.g., Bumby, 2000; Marshall, 1989; Seidman, Marshall, Hudson, & Robertson, 1994; Ward, Hudson, Marshall, & Seigert, 1995

¹¹ Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004

¹² See, e.g., Bumby, 2000; Fernandez, Marshall, Lightbody, & O'Sullivan, 1999; Marshall, O'Sullivan, & Fernandez, 1996

¹³ Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004

¹⁴ See, e.g., Laws, 1989; Laws, Hudson, & Ward, 2000; Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999;

¹⁵ Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004

¹⁶ Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, & Murphy, 1987; Ahlmeyer, Heil, McKee, & English, 2000; Freeman-Longo & Blanchard, 1998; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003

¹⁷ Marshall, 1996

¹⁸ Hanson & Slater, 1988; Dhawan & Marshall, 1996

¹⁹ Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004

²⁰ Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004

²¹ Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004