

AGE AND SEXUAL RECIDIVISM

Question: Does the risk of sexual offending decrease with age?

Background: Sexual offences are among the crimes that invoke the most public concern. The observed rate of new sexual offences among known sexual offenders is 10% to 15% after 4-5 years. Not all sexual offenders, however, reoffend at the same rate. Effective criminal justice interventions require tailoring sanctions and rehabilitative efforts to the level of risk posed by the offenders. Research has clearly established that rate of general (non-sexual) criminal behaviour decreases with age. Less is known about the extent to which the risk for sexual crimes also decreases with age.

Method: Information concerning age and sexual recidivism was combined from ten studies of adult male sexual offenders from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom (total sample of 4,673). For half of the studies, the follow-up period was 5 years or more (range of 2 to 16 years). The observed rates of sexual recidivism ranged from 7% to 36% (average of

17.5%) based on the criteria used in the original studies (charges, convictions and/or readmissions to hospital).

Answer: On average, the rate of sexual recidivism decreased with age. The effect was not large and the patterns were different for rapists, extrafamilial child molesters and intrafamilial child molesters (incest offenders). For rapists, the highest risk age period was between 18 and 25 years, with a gradual decline in risk for each older age period. There were very few old rapists (greater than age 60) and none were known to recidivate sexually. In contrast, the highest risk period for extrafamilial child molesters was between the ages of 25 and 35, with only modest declines in their recidivism risk until after the age of 50. Incest offenders were less likely to recidivate than either rapists or extrafamilial child molesters; however, incest offenders in the 18 to 25 year age group were among the offenders most likely to sexually reoffend. The observed pattern of results is consistent with developmental changes in sexual drive, self-control, and opportunities to offend.

Policy Implications:

1. Not all sexual offenders are equally likely to reoffend. Consequently, blanket policies applied to all sexual offenders are likely to waste resources on low risk offenders while failing to provide adequate interventions to the higher risk cases.
2. The offenders' age and type of victim should be jointly considered in applied risk assessments of sexual offenders. This will likely improve predictive accuracy.
3. Different forms of interventions may be required for older sexual offenders than for younger sexual

offenders. Interventions aimed at preventing new offences should be a priority for young sexual offenders at risk for further offending. For older sexual offenders, interventions may make the greatest contribution when they focus on reparation of harm already caused rather than focussing on reducing the risk for recidivism, which may already be low.

Source: Hanson, R. K. (2001). *Age and sexual recidivism: A comparison of rapists and child molesters*. (User Report No. 2001-01). Ottawa: Department of the Solicitor General of Canada.

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