

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



NEARI PRESS & TRAINING CENTER

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By David Prescott and Joan Tabachnick

### **"Documenting the Decline in Sexual Recidivism Rates Among Adjudicated Adolescents"**

#### **AUTHORS:**

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**QUESTION:** What are the implications of a decline in juvenile recidivism rates?

#### **RESEARCH:**

The sexual recidivism rates among adults have dropped dramatically in recent decades. The rates of child sexual abuse have dropped by 62% between 1990 and 2000. The FBI 2012 data showed a 41% decline in violent crime rates for adults between 1990 and 2009. And violent crime for adolescents fell even more (55%) between 1994 and 2010. Given these dramatic decreases, Michael Caldwell questioned whether there was a similar decline in the sexual recidivism rates of adolescents over a similar period of time.

Adolescents who have been arrested for a sexual offense are well known to pose a relatively low risk of sexual recidivism as they age. Because of this relatively low rate of

re-offense, it has been extremely difficult to establish a reliable base rate for adolescent sexual recidivism. The present research explored what can be said about providing a base rate estimate for adolescent sexual recidivism. A base rate for sexual recidivism is one of the most important considerations in assessing risk – the cornerstone that may be helpful for both public policy and in clinical application of risk assessment methods.

For this research, Michael Caldwell examined 106 studies involving 33,783 adolescents adjudicated of a sexual offense between 1938 and 2014. Caldwell found a weighted mean base rate for sexual recidivism of 4.92% over a mean follow-up time of nearly 5 years (59.98 months). As might be expected, the longer follow-up periods yielded higher recidivism rates for up to 36 months. However, unlike adults, follow-up times that exceeded 36 months did not generate any higher sexual recidivism rates.

In exploring the question about whether sexual recidivism rates are decreasing, Caldwell examined 33 studies between 2000 and 2015 and reported a weighted mean sexual recidivism rate of 2.75% -- which is 73% lower than the rate of 10.30% reported by studies conducted between 1980 and 1995. Caldwell offered a number of factors that may have combined to result in a fundamental change in the propensity for violence. These included: 1) changes in juvenile justice procedures that have altered the makeup of more recent adjudicated adolescents and dilutes the overall risk in this population; 2) similar declines in surveys of victimization rates may support the idea that there has been a real decline in sexually inappropriate and sexually aggressive behaviors in adolescents; and 3) a substantial improvement in the efficacy of treatment programs for these adolescents.

#### **BOTTOM LINE:**

More recent studies between 2000 and 2015 and reported a weighted mean sexual recidivism rate for adolescents of 2.75% -- a 73% decrease compared to studies conducted between 1980 and 1995

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS:**

Gone are the days when professionals could assume that their all of their adolescent clientele are destined to repeat historical behavior. From a safety and political point of view, it can be tempting for professionals to assume that a given youth in their care is high risk especially when we also know that most cases of sexual abuse are not reported. However, acknowledging this concern, these data highlight the need to take the low base rates of recidivism very seriously, particularly when conducting risk assessments. Indeed, two findings stand out for purposes of risk assessment: The first is clinicians should carefully explore all of the evidence before making the conclusion that a given adolescent poses anything other than a low level of risk for sexual re-offense. With this new data, it is clear that all risk assessments must be anchored in the most applicable base rates. The second finding is that the nonsexual re-offense rates should remain a key concern for professionals involved in assessment and treatment. With the rate for nonsexual re-offense considerably higher than sexual re-offense, it will be important for professionals to consider a wide range of risks and needs for the youth they serve.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD:**

Perhaps the most impressive feature of this study is its sheer size. The trends noted in the data as well as the low base rates for sexual re-offense are simply too strong to write off or dismiss. Further, as Caldwell notes, the trends presented mirror those of larger trends of violence around the world during the past two decades. Caldwell points to the fact that there are many possible reasons for this decrease in violence and there is ultimately much we don't know about how these changes have occurred. Even though not all sexual abuse is reported, and recidivism rates are therefore an underestimate, these data sets from around the world highlight extremely important trends. This study is therefore a likely turning point for our field.

As our field explores the implications of these compelling findings, it may be necessary to explore what other studies have found. Some key findings:

- 1) Punishment-only approaches don't appear to work;
- 2) Treatment targeted to an individual's needs and strengths is the most effective approach;

- 3) Treatment combined with other interventions involving all aspects of an adolescent's life (e.g., family, school, pro-social activities, etc.) can be even more effective; and
- 4) Interventions that include the youth's ability to build a better future are more likely to be successful than those that focus exclusively on exploring past problematic behaviors.

**Abstract:**

Data from several sources have indicated that violence in general (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012; Finkelhor & Jones, 2004; Sickmund, & Puzzanchera, 2014), and sexual recidivism in adult offenders (Duwe, 2014; Helmus, 2009; Wisconsin Department of Corrections, 2015), has declined substantially in recent decades. This finding is significant because the potential effectiveness of public policies intended to reduce sexual violence in society rests in part on the base rate for re-offense of adjudicated violent offenders. This study examined whether the recidivism base rate for juvenile sexual recidivism has undergone a similar decline in recent decades. We examined 106 studies from 98 reports or data sets involving 33,783 cases of adjudicated juvenile sexual offenders that were carried out between 1938 and 2014. Results showed a weighted mean base rate for sexual recidivism of 4.92% over a mean follow-up time of 58.98 months ( $SD = 50.97$ ,  $Median = 52.75$ ). The year of initiation of the study predicted the sexual recidivism rate after controlling for the follow-up time ( $F = 14.72$ ,  $p = .0002$ ). Studies conducted between 2000 and 2015 reported a weighted mean sexual recidivism rate of 2.75%; 73% lower than the rate of 10.30% reported by studies conducted between 1980 and 1995. The implications for public policies, risk assessment methods, and clinical services are discussed.

**Citation:**

Caldwell, M. F. (2016, July 18). Quantifying the Decline in Juvenile Sexual Recidivism Rates. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/law0000094>