

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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By David Prescott and Alisa Klein

“The Juvenile Sex Offender: Criminal Careers and Life Events.”

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(Please see below for full citation and abstract.)

THE QUESTIONS

Do adult life events such as marriage, parenthood, and employment serve as protective factors in keeping youth convicted of sexual offenses from reoffending as adults? Do the marital, parental, employment, and criminal careers and their association with offending in adulthood differ for the three types of youth convicted of a sex offense (those who have abused younger children, those who have abused peers, and those who have offended within a group)?

THE RESEARCH

The authors acknowledge that there have been several studies over the last 15 years that have looked at the adult criminal careers of youth who have been convicted of a sex offense and note that this research has by and large revealed that youth convicted of sex offenses have adult offense patterns very similar to youthful offenders of non-sexual crimes; specifically, that both groups show a low rate of recidivism and a gradual decline in general offending after adolescence. The authors hypothesize that it is likely that similar protective factors among both groups contribute to desistance. They warn, however, that there are three reasons why this hypothesis may not be correct and needs to be studied:

1. It is well documented that mood disorders and psychiatric disturbances are more common among youth who have sexually offended than youth who have not.

2. With regard to employment, current policies keep people who have sexually offended from particular kinds of employment, thus limiting their access to employment opportunities.
3. The stigma of having been labeled as “sex offenders” as a youth may impede their ability as adults to form relationships and ultimately, get married.

The authors emphasize that policies of sex offender registration, notification, and others that are applied to youth who have been convicted of a sexual offense, are likely counter-productive because they may keep the youth, overall, from going on to experience protective life events such as marriage, parenthood, and employment. Therefore, this study aims to examine the development of youth convicted of a sexual offense over the life course by examining the three identified adult life events: marriage, parenthood, and employment -- and their association with adult offending.

The sample studied included 498 Dutch males convicted of a sexual offense. The age of the youth ranged from 10 to 17 years, with an average of 14.4 years when they offended and were followed for an average span of 28.7 years. The participants were classified into one of three groups: juveniles who have been convicted for abusing a pre-pubertal child who is at least 5 years younger; youths convicted for a sexual offense against a victim their own age or older; and youth who had committed the sexual offense with at least one co-offender. To answer the research questions, frequency counts were used, as well as a “within-individual” regression model that compares an individual to himself over a period of time. Additionally, two multivariate models were estimated with the first examining the effect of marriage, parenthood, and employment on offending and the second model examining the effect of marriage, parenthood, and employment on offending per the three identified categories of youth.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The participants in this study had an overall sexual recidivism rate of 12 percent. Of the new sex offenses, only 10 percent were committed in adulthood (after age 18), which was interpreted to mean that sex offending declined as the sample aged. The rate of sexual re-offense in adulthood showed no significant differences between the three offender categories. By age 28, 12.1 percent of the sample was ever married (interestingly, a rate lower than the overall Dutch male population in which 20 percent are married by the age of 28), and about 20.5 percent of the sample had fathered at least one child and on average, had children at younger ages than average Dutch males. There were no significant differences in the rate of fathering children among the three types of youth who had been convicted of a sexual offense.

With regard to employment, the sample at age 20 was similar to that of average Dutch males but with age, JSOs appeared to increasingly lag behind in their employment, leading the authors to surmise that “perhaps the lack of social skills and other negative characteristics associated with this population cause frequent termination of job contracts, making workforce re-entry increasingly harder as they grow older” or that the “influence of incarceration on employment” made the sample less employable. What’s more, the participants often had relatively short employment contracts, lasting an average of no longer than 6 months and their careers were interspersed with periods of unemployment. However, there were no significant

differences in employment rates among the three groups of those who had been convicted of a sexual offense in their youth.

In sum, the authors found that participants “fulfill[ed] adult roles” less than other males in Holland. Heterogeneity was found between the three groups in the sample: those who had been convicted of the sexual abuse of a younger child did sexually re-offend at a higher rate than the other two groups when they became parents. The authors hypothesize that this may be due to pedophilic or paraphilic interests among this group and recommend further study on this topic. The authors noted a number of limitations of their study such as, among others, whether or not the quality of participants’ marriage and employment might influence their re-offense rates. Because they did not refine their research accordingly, the authors recommend future investigation into the influence of developmental life experiences on re-offense rates of individuals convicted of sex offenses as juveniles.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

These findings add to the existing literature demonstrating that treatment programs focusing solely on sexual abuse are missing critical areas that contribute to risk as well as protective factors. The capacity to develop and maintain relationships, stable employment, and parenthood are vitally important skills. Ultimately, treatment and supervision should aim at helping young men become the best men they can be.

Some caution is in order, however. This study finds a significantly higher sexual re-offense rate than recent American studies, such as Michael Caldwell’s 2016 meta-analysis. There may be many possible causes for this higher rate, including that this sample included youth with more severe histories of offending. Nonetheless, these findings point once again to the need for holistic treatment and supervision approaches. In designing treatment plans and programs, it behooves us to ask, “How can we guide youth in such a way that they can be competent at raising their own children?”

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

This study also found that when youth do re-offend sexually, it is more likely to occur when they are still adolescents. For this and other reasons, it is crucial that policymakers look beyond aggressive, long-term measures such as registration, notification, and residence restrictions. The weight of the evidence is in the direction of short-term, helpful responses to abuse, such as treatment and supervision aimed at helping adolescents become adults.

ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate whether the life events of marriage, parenthood, and employment were associated with general offending for a Dutch sample of 498 juvenile sex offenders (JSOs). In previous empirical studies, these life events were found to limit adult general offending in the population as well as high-risk samples. A hybrid random effects model is used to investigate within-individual changes of these life events in association with general offending. We also investigated whether the findings differed for child abusers, peer abusers, and group

offenders, as they have distinct background profiles. We found that JSOs make limited transitions into the state of marriage, parenthood, and employment, showing overall stagnating participation rates. For the entire sample of JSOs, employment was found to be associated with a decrease in offending. Group offenders benefited most from employment. Marriage and parenthood were not associated with the general offending patterns, whereas for child abusers, parenthood was associated with an increase in offending. We conclude that policies aimed at guidance toward employment, or inclusion into conventional society, may be effective for JSOs.

CITATION

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