

## SOCIAL NETWORKS OF SEXUAL OFFENDERS

**Question:** Do sexual offenders know other sexual offenders?

**Background:** It is well known that criminals are likely to know other people (friends, family) who are involved in crime. People tend to associate with those who share the same background and values, and criminals are no exception. Such deviant peer groups are thought to contribute to criminal behaviour by supporting attitudes tolerant of crime, by providing knowledge about how to commit crimes, as well as by providing direct assistance for criminal acts. Sexual offenders, in contrast, are often considered to be loners who act in isolation. However, given the existence of some sexually deviant groups (e.g., rape gangs, pro-pedophilic organizations), further research is justified.

**Method:** A standard questionnaire was given to the following groups: a) 126 convicted sexual offenders who admitted to at least one sexual offense; b) 49 self-admitted sexual offenders who had never been charged or convicted of a sexual offense; c) 42 nonsexual criminals; and d)

85 community nonoffenders. All the participants were adult males selected from correctional institutions or the community in five provinces. The 10 items of the questionnaire asked whether the men knew others (friends, family, acquaintances) who had been sexually involved with children (child molesting) or had forced sex upon adult women (rape).

**Answer:** In comparison to the nonoffender community group, the sexual offenders reported considerably more friends, family and acquaintances who had committed sexual offenses. The associations tended to be offence specific, such that child molesters knew other child molesters and rapists knew other rapists. On average, the convicted child molesters reported having one or two current friends who were child molesters, whereas almost none of the community nonoffenders and few of the nonsexual criminals and rapists reported having such friends.

The current study, however, did not assess whether the sexual offenders met before or after committing their own sexual crimes.

Some may have been long-term friends whereas other may have met in prison. Since the sexual offenders reported that many of their relatives were also sexual offenders, it is unlikely that all their deviant associations were formed following involvement with the criminal justice system.

**Policy Implications:**

1. Sexual offender assessments should include information on whether they have friends or family that may be supporting their sexual crimes.

2. Treatment for sexual offenders should address the potential of negative peer influences.
3. Sexual offenders in group treatment should be discouraged from socializing outside of group until they have internalized the prosocial values taught in treatment.

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For further information contact:

R. Karl Hanson  
Solicitor General Canada  
340 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0P8  
Tel (613) 991-2840  
Fax (613) 990-8295  
e-mail hansonk@sgc.gc.ca

Also available on Solicitor General Canada's Internet Site @<http://www.sgc.gc.ca>