



Research Summary



ISSN 1916-4009

Vol. 18, No. 2

March 2013

ATTITUDES SUPPORTIVE OF SEX OFFENDING PREDICT RECIDIVISM

Question: Do attitudes supportive of sex offending predict recidivism among sexual offenders?

Background: Effectively managing the risk posed by sexual offenders requires an understanding of the factors related to offending. In the general psychology literature, attitudes predict behaviour, but not as strongly as some people believe. Consequently, it is important to know how well assessments of attitudes predict risk among sexual offenders.

Previous research has found that procriminal attitudes predict recidivism among general offenders, but much remains unknown. Attitudes supportive of sex offending, in particular, may be hard to assess because of the strong social stigma associated with this type of crime.

Another challenge is that “attitudes” mean different things to different people. Even researchers have not been consistent in what they mean by the term. A study was undertaken that focused on the relatively enduring beliefs that sexual offending is acceptable (e.g., children are not harmed by sex with adults; some women like to be raped). Excluded in the study were post-hoc justifications for offence behaviour that are meant to deny or minimize offenders’

criminal responsibility (e.g., I didn’t mean to do it, I was drunk).

Attitudes related to sexual offences have played a key part in most theories of sexual offending and are commonly targeted in treatment. Knowing which attitudes are most problematic could improve assessment and treatment practices.

Method: A comprehensive literature review was conducted, identifying 45 studies that examined the relationship between one or more measure of attitudes tolerant of sex offending and sexual recidivism. These studies, involving 13,782 sexual offenders, were statistically combined. Different types of attitudes (e.g., specific measures, attitudes towards child molestation, rape attitudes), different types of sex offenders (child molesters and rapists), different types of recidivism (sexual, violent, and general), and different assessment times (pre-treatment or post-treatment) were examined.

Answer: Attitudes supportive of sexual offending predicted sexual recidivism and, to a lesser extent, violent and general recidivism. Attitudes assessed prior to treatment predicted just as well as when offenders were assessed after treatment.

Rape attitudes did not predict as well as attitudes related to child molestation. Furthermore, all sex offence attitudes predicted better for child molesters than for rapists. In general, the best prediction was found when the attitudes matched the offence history (child molester attitudes with child molesters; rape attitudes with rapists).

Finally, the study found that although both self-report and professional ratings predicted recidivism, the professional ratings predicted better.

Policy Implications:

1. Attitudes supportive of sexual offending are a psychologically meaningful risk factor for sexual recidivism and should be targeted in the assessment and treatment of sexual offenders.
2. Practitioners should be attentive to the specific types of attitudes that are linked to the offender's particular pattern of offending.
3. There are opportunities for public health interventions by targeting attitudes supportive of sexual offending (e.g., social marketing tailored toward high risk groups).

Source: Helmus, L., Hanson, R. K., Babchishin, K. M., & Mann, R. E. (2013). Attitudes supportive of sexual offending predict recidivism: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse, 14*, 34-53.

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