

## TRIGGERS OF SEXUAL OFFENSE RECIDIVISM

**Question:** When are sexual offenders are at risk to re-offend?

**Background:** Canadians are understandably concerned about the threat to the community posed by sexual offenders. Effective community supervision requires knowing when sexual offenders are likely to re-offend so appropriate action can be taken. Previous research has identified a number of factors (e.g., prior sexual offenses, victim type) related to long-term risk potential. There has been little research, however, on what triggers recidivism.

**Method:** The study compared 208 sexual offenders who committed a new sexual offense while on community supervision (recidivists) with 201 who did not (non-recidivists). The offenders came from correctional systems in all regions of Canada (both federal and provincial). The recidivists and non-recidivists were matched on the number of officially recorded offenses as well as victim type (approximately equal numbers of rapists, boy-victim child molesters and girl-victim child molesters).

Information was collected through interviews with probation and parole officers and file reviews. The offenders themselves were not contacted. Two time periods were examined: the 4-6 weeks just prior to re-offending and an equivalent period six months earlier. Consequently, the study could examine stable differences between the recidivists and non-recidivists as well as immediate precursors to re-offense.

**Answer:** The recidivists differed from the non-recidivists on many factors. The recidivists were generally considered to have poor social supports, sexual pre-occupations, attitudes tolerant of sexual assault, antisocial lifestyles, poor self-management strategies and difficulties cooperating with community supervision. The overall emotional mood of the recidivists and non-recidivists was similar, but the recidivists showed increased anger and subjective distress just prior to re-offending. With few exceptions, the same factors were important for rapists and child molesters.

Equal numbers of recidivists and non-recidivists had attended specialized

treatment programs. The recidivists, however, were those most likely to have dropped-out or to have been described as poor treatment candidates.

The dynamic risk factors reported by the officers continued to be strongly associated with recidivism even after controlling for pre-existing differences in static risk factors, such as criminal history, prior sexual deviance and intelligence.

The factors identified in the interview data were reflected (to a lesser extent) in the officers' contemporaneous case notes, which suggests that the interview findings cannot be completely attributed to retrospective recall bias. The quality of the case notes was limited, however, with 10% of the files containing no information at all.

### Policy Implications:

1. Effective community supervision of sexual offenders should consider the risk factors identified in the current study (e.g., sexual pre-occupations, negative peer influences, poor self-management). Although experienced officers already attend to many of these factors, this study provides

direction to officers less familiar with the supervision of sexual offenders.

2. The supervision of sexual offenders may require specialized training. Some of the risk factors may be unique to sexual offenders (e.g., sexual pre-occupations).

Consequently, officers trained in the supervision of general offenders may feel uncomfortable or lack the skills needed to monitor the risk for sexual recidivism (e.g., monitoring masturbation fantasies).

3. Careful evaluations of dynamic risk factors should increase the number of offenders who can successfully be released into the community. By monitoring the offenders' risk indicators, officers should be able to provide graduated and responsive interventions in order to prevent sexual recidivism.

**Source:** Hanson, R. K., & Harris, A. (1998). Dynamic predictors of sexual recidivism. (User Report No. 1998 - 01). Ottawa: Department of the Solicitor General of Canada.

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