FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDERS

Factors Related to Sexual Recidivism among Women

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Just like with male sexual offenders, the assessment of female sexual offenders is predominantly driven by the need to establish the likelihood of future sexual offending behavior, identify problematic issues related to their offending, and outline interventions that would reduce their risk of recidivism. Women are also subjected to the same sanctions as men in the criminal justice system, including social control policies (e.g., Sexually Violent Predator laws in the U.S.). As such, it is crucial that their assessment of risk and treatment needs be based on empirically validated approaches. However, in contrast to men, there is no validated instrument to assess risk of sexual recidivism among women. The reason for this lack of instrument is simple: The evidence indicates that the large majority (i.e., ≈ 98%) of female sexual offenders, once they have been detected and sanctioned for a sexual offense, will not commit a new one. This low rate of sexual recidivism, combined with the low prevalence of female sexual offending (about 5% of adult sexual offenders – see Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2009), means that the extremely large samples of female sexual recidivists that are needed to develop a risk assessment tool are simply not available. As a result, evaluators can only rely on their professional judgment to assess risk of sexual recidivism among women.

Although large samples are not available, the examination of the features that distinguish female sexual recidivists from non-recidivists must begin. It is only through the gradual accumulation of data that we will eventually develop an empirical basis for the determination of the factors related to sexual recidivism among women. The current paper is the first step in this endeavor. A group of 27 true female true sexual recidivists (i.e., offenders who were arrested and sanctioned for a sexual offense, were released, and then
comitted a new sexual offense) was assembled for the current study. Information available for the study includes both gender-neutral factors (e.g., criminal history; substance abuse history) and gender-specific elements (e.g., victimization history; presence of co-offender). A matching group of female sexual offenders who did not recidivate constitutes the comparison group. The analyses will examine differences between the two groups on both gender-neutral and gender-specific elements to shed some light on the factors that relate to sexual recidivism among women. Factors related to sexual recidivism among women will be contrasted to those of male sexual offenders, and implications for risk assessment will be discussed.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Participants will understand the current limitations on our knowledge regarding factors related to sexual recidivism among women.
2. Participants will learn which factors differentiate women who sexually recidivate from those who do not.
3. Participants will understand the implications of these findings for the risk assessment of female sexual offenders.

The Relationship between Psychopathy and Recidivism in a Sample of Female Sexual Offenders

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Currently, there are no risk assessment tools that have been validated for female sexual offenders. Thus, women in several states are being placed on public sex offender registries based on risk assessment tools that have been validated only for male sexual offenders. The sexual recidivism rate for female sexual offenders is reported to be very low (1-3%; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010). Placing female sexual offenders on the registry may be an undue hardship that produces significant consequences once they are released back into the community, as they are especially reliant on the emotional support of others. They are likely to experience stigmatization and become isolated from friends and family as a result of being placed on the registry, which can be detrimental to their success.

In 2005, the state legislature of Texas mandated risk assessments with all sexual offenders leaving the prison system who will be placed on the registry. This set of risk assessments includes the Psychopathy Checklist - Revised (Hare, 1991). However, only research with male sexual offenders has provided evidence for this practice. This study
seeks to examine the utility of psychopathy, as measured by the PCL-R, as a risk predictor in a sample of 244 female sexual offenders in Texas. These offenders were imprisoned for at least one sexual offense and were required to be assessed with the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised as part of their risk assessment for the public registry of sexual offenders. The evaluators were all certified to administer the PCL-R. The sample includes all female sexual offenders who have completed the risk assessment beginning in 2008 when the state began administration.

The average offender in this study was white and approximately 36 years old with three prior arrests and four charges. Almost two-thirds of the offenders in this study had at least one prior arrest for a general offense, while almost one-fourth of the sample had at least one prior arrest for a violent offense. Twelve offenders had previous arrests for sex offenses. The most frequent index offenses were sexual assault of a child, aggravated sexual assault of a child, and indecency with a child by contact. While only a slightly greater percentage of the victims were female (n = 143; 53.4 percent), the distribution of age appeared to be more widespread, with ages ranging from 2-65. However, the majority of victims appeared to be between 11 and 16 years of age, with 68.2 percent of victims falling into this age range. The average victim in this study was a 14-year-old female.

Overall, 21.3 percent (n = 52) of the sample recidivated, or was rearrested with any offense. None of the offenders in this sample sexually recidivated and 3.7 percent (n = 9) of offenders recidivated with a violent offense. The majority of individuals who recidivated were rearrested with a general offense; the results indicated that 19.7 percent (n = 48) of the offenders recidivated generally. Logistic regression results indicate that the PCL-R factor 2 (antisocial lifestyle) was a significant predictor for female sexual offenders who recidivated with a general offense. Factor 1 of the PCL-R significantly predicted violent recidivism and the PCL-R total score was significantly higher for female sexual offenders who recidivated violently. The PCL-R items of pathological lying and juvenile delinquency were significant predictors of recidivism time for this sample of female sexual offenders. Differences in psychopathy will also be assessed across type of female offender (solo vs. co-offender) and victim gender. The recidivism rates, types, and predictors will be provided. Implications for risk assessment, treatment need, and female sexual offender registration is discussed.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Learn how risk assessment tools are being utilized with female sex offenders
2. Understand how psychopathy is related to recidivism in the current sample of female sexual offenders
3. Understand the implications of psychopathy assessment in the risk and treatment of female sexual offenders