

# Toward a Public Health Response to Sexual Violence

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The scene is familiar to most: A known sex offender commits another ghastly crime. Media coverage follows, and the public asks how this can happen when it seems obvious that all abusers do it again. Currently, New York seeks to join the other 19 states with laws to detain sex criminals beyond their prison terms. Media accounts suggest that the path toward reducing the harm of sexual abuse can be costly and far from clear.

Fortunately, there is cause for optimism, although this is less likely to make headlines. First, studies show that treatment has improved in recent years. One authoritative study found that treated offenders were 40% less likely to commit new sex crimes and that treatment targeting the thought processes behind offending are particularly successful. Further, while sex-offender treatment methods will continue to improve with further research and development, combining treatment with supervision shows greater promise, and reminds us that the answers to sexual violence come from many sources. The available treatment studies are too often silent with respect to the quality of community supervision that takes place during and afterwards.

What media accounts often ignore is that many sexual offenders are able to live offense-free in the community. For example, there are currently eighteen thousand registered sex offenders in Wisconsin. Of those, the courts have found only around four hundred to be dangerous enough to require civil commitment. Of those committed, only a handful has attracted media attention. Within the commonly cited statistics are some basic facts: Many, if not most, sex offenders are not known to re-offend, and most appear to offend less as they grow older. Although many committed sexual crimes prior to their first arrest, the research shows more promise for those men who encounter the legal system and have some opportunity to change. The majority of those convicted for sexual crimes are first-time offenders, and most of those arrested again commit non-sexual crimes. Offenders who are able to maintain stability in their homes and employment are less likely to commit further crimes. Public policy is therefore most effective

when it considers those factors that prevent crime as well as those that make communities feel safer.

It is tempting to think that society can identify and incapacitate sex offenders, and yet they are not a separate class of people. Studies of sexual aggression on college campuses routinely find that alarming numbers of college-aged males engage in unwanted or coercive sexual behaviors, and that often as many as eight percent have engaged in a behavior for which they could be prosecuted for sexual assault. In fact, the incidence of sexual aggression in America is so high that it is a public health issue, one not explained by purely psychological or criminological perspectives.

Media accounts often indicate either that treatment does not work or that there is no “cure.” These accounts do not often fully explore the issues. One frequently cited Californian study found that treatment did not appear to reduce recidivism with high-risk offenders. However, it did find that offenders who clearly understood their treatment goals (or “got it” in the language of the authors) were in fact less likely to reoffend. This illustrates the difference between simply providing a treatment program and using treatment as a pathway to change. A doctor can provide effective treatments to heart attack patients, but if patients do not meaningfully participate in their treatment (such as by following diet and exercise recommendations), they are more likely to have further heart problems. Likewise, the fact that some people die following chemotherapy does not mean that we should abandon this kind of treatment for cancer.

The path to reduced sexual offending lies in prevention, assessment, treatment, supervision, and collaboration between all elements involved in an offender’s reintegration into society. While it is important to examine and improve the assessment and treatment methods in reducing harm, it is equally important not to dismiss the elements that show promise. For society to do nothing in the face of skepticism is unacceptable.