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Sex Offenders: Recidivism, Re-Entry Policy and Facts

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Sexual predation is back in the national spotlight since Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State defense coordinator who's accused of sexually assaulting eight boys over 15 years, and two top university officials and has been charged with sexual abuse and covering up the abuse.

It doesn't take much imagination to understand the horrors and damage caused by criminal offenders. And it's hard to talk about the facts of any criminal behavior since misinformation is common and ideas contrary to misinformation are quickly associated as soft on crime. The nuances of any criminal behavior are complicated.

Recidivism Statistics

The percentages rearrested (but not necessarily guilty) for the "same category of offense" for which they were most recently in prison for were:

- 13.4% of released robbers
- 22.0% of released assailters
- 23.4% of released burglars
- 33.9% of released larcenists
- 19.0% of released defrauders
- 41.2% of released drug offenders
- 2.5% of released rapists

Contrary to popular belief, as a group, sex offenders have the lowest rate of recidivism of all the crime categories. These statistics completely fly in the face of conventional wisdom about sex offenders being the most likely group of criminals to re-offend for their initial crime, but these are the facts. It could be argued that sex offender recidivism isn't detected and that is why this number is so low, but that could also be said of other crime categories, too.

Independent studies of the effectiveness of in-prison treatment programs for sex offenders have shown that evidence-based programs can reduce recidivism by up to 15 percent. This might not sound like much, but it is. Recidivism can be further reduced up to 30 percent with after prison intervention. However, our current policies make no sense; we release many offenders to the public without some form of post-release supervision. Regardless of the program offered, it is very important to measure the effect the program has on recidivism; just because something is evidence-based, there can't be an assumption it works in the new location!

Reentry Policy

Post-release supervision helps decrease recidivism since it involves keeping an eye on the ex-offender, but also with assisting the ex-offender to find a job, obtain drug treatment and find housing, all of which are important to staying crime free. On the issue of housing, this is perhaps the biggest challenge facing ex-sex offenders. No one wants them and they have many legal obstacles when finding housing. And they have burnt all their bridges with society and even their family. To help reduce the chances of them re-offending, housing is important for every ex-offender.

Reports released from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that when sex offenders do recidivate with a sex offense, approximately 75% victimize an acquaintance. The important point of this is that current sex offender residential restrictions often don't account for this and many other findings.

There are many types of sex offenders, from those who urinate in public to sexual predators and pedophiles. Some are criminally sentenced inmates while others are civil commitments deemed too dangerous to release even though they have served their sentence. There are different grades of sex offenders that include:
• Level 1 (low risk of repeat offense), or
• Level 2 (moderate risk of repeat offense), or
• Level 3 (high risk of repeat offense and a threat to public safety exists).

There are nearly 740,000 registered sex offenders in the United States. Recent research finds that "the data presented here do not support the claim that the public is safer from sex offenders due to community notification laws."

This is not to suggest that we should not have sex offender registries. What it suggests is that sex offender registries may provide a false sense of security, and so other strategies are necessary. In addition, former sex offenders who do not re-offend find that sex offender registries limit their housing, job and educational opportunities. Right or wrong, some people may feel that former sex offenders deserve ongoing punishment. But it is important to note that difficulty finding a job or place to live is a risk factor for other types of crime. Adequate housing is very important for sex offenders. Think about it like this -- we don't want sex offenders to be homeless because if they are homeless, we don't know where they are.

To offer a policy outline on what to do for the various types of sex offenders by the different levels is far beyond the scope of this article. The important thing to note is that housing, jobs and health care are important to decrease recidivism. Also, we can't make assumptions about what works in public safety based on how we think something is or should be -- what works and what doesn't is sometimes counterintuitive.

**In Conclusion**

Effective strategies to deal with sex offenders are not based on anecdote, emotion, or case examples of just one; they are based on facts and what we know about the issue. At times we hear about a high profile event; but it is important to remember that high profile events are high profile precisely because they are unusual and unlikely.

Making policy based on high profile events is a surefire way to overreact and make inefficient and, worse, ineffective policy. In short, a high profile event is good time find out where a shortcoming or loophole might reside, but a high profile event is not what policy should be based on. Doing so would result in the majority of cases being marginalized and a strategy designed around an unlikely event.

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