

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT and PLANNING INITIATIVE

Chapter 3: Recidivism of Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses

by Christopher Lobanov-Rostovsky

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Introduction

Juveniles who commit sexual offenses have come under increasing scrutiny from the public and policymakers over the past 25 years. Previously, this population was not seen as a significant public safety threat and was instead viewed with a "boys will be boys" attitude. However, in a series of studies conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s that featured retrospective sexual history interviews with adult sexual offenders, many adults reported they began their sexual offending during adolescence. These findings led practitioners and policymakers to focus more attention on juveniles who commit sexual offenses as a way to prevent adult sexual offending.

In the absence of an empirically based foundation of knowledge on juveniles who commit sexual offenses, interventions for juveniles who commit sex crimes were constructed using existing theories and practices designed for adults. Whether or not juveniles who commit sexual offenses might differ from adult sexual offenders was rarely considered. Also, little consideration was given to any differences that might exist between juveniles who commit sexual offenses and those who commit nonsexual offenses. Since the 1980s, a significant body of knowledge specific to juveniles who commit sexual offenses has been developed, particularly in relation to the characteristics of these youth and their propensity to reoffend. To accomplish this, researchers employed methodologies very different from those that retrospectively examined the offending history of adult sex offenders. These methodologies enabled researchers to better understand the experiences, characteristics, and behaviors of juveniles who commit sexual offenses, including rates and patterns of recidivism.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of recidivism research on juveniles who commit sexual offenses. Research findings concerning both sexual and general recidivism are presented. Findings concerning general recidivism are important because many juveniles who commit sexual offenses also engage or will engage in nonsexual criminal offending. In fact, research has demonstrated that juveniles who commit sexual offenses are more likely to recidivate in a nonsexual rather than a sexual manner. Sexual recidivism and general recidivism are both risks to public safety.

Prior to reviewing the recidivism research, a definition of recidivism is needed. Recidivism has been conceptually defined as the return to criminal behavior by an individual previously convicted of or adjudicated for a criminal offense (Maltz, 2001). It is indicative of a criminal offender's recurrent failure to follow the law despite having been subject to some type of response from the criminal or juvenile justice system. Recidivism is not merely repeat offending, but rather refers to the recurrence of illegal behavior after a criminal offender receives negative legal consequences, including legal supervision, rehabilitative treatment, or some form of residential or institutional placement. (For more information on the "Effectiveness of Treatment for Juveniles Who Sexually Offend," see [chapter 5](#) in the Juvenile section.) Given the profound impact that sexual recidivism has on victims and the community, it is important to know the patterns and rates of recidivism attributed to juveniles who commit sexual offenses. However, sexual recidivism has proven difficult to quantify for both juveniles and adults for a number of reasons; the main reason is the extent to which sexual crimes are underreported to authorities. As a result, sexual recidivism rates do not necessarily capture the true extent of sexual reoffense, and all analyses of recidivism research must be mindful of this limitation. In addition, recidivism has been defined and operationalized by researchers in various ways (e.g., self-report, rearrest/new charge, readjudication for juveniles under age 18 or conviction for those who have now become adults, and recommitment for juveniles or reincarceration for adults). This hampers cross-study comparisons and often results in variations in observed recidivism rates that are primarily artifacts of different study methodologies. Despite these limitations, recidivism research on juveniles who commit sexual offenses provides an empirical basis for understanding both the absolute and relative risk of reoffense posed by this population. Trustworthy data on the recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses, and how they compare to rates found for both adult sex offenders and other juvenile offenders, can help policymakers and practitioners at the federal, state, and local levels develop interventions that are not only effective, but also appropriate and proportionate.

This chapter does not present an exhaustive review of the recidivism research related to juveniles who commit sexual offenses, but instead focuses on studies deemed to be important for a general understanding of recidivism rates and patterns. This review also does not address the risk factors related to recidivism, the manner in which recidivism risk might be mitigated through treatment or supervision practices, or research findings on adult sexual offender recidivism. Research on the effectiveness of treatment for juveniles who commit sexual offenses is reviewed in [chapter 5](#) of the Juvenile section.

FINDINGS

There does not appear to be a significant difference in the rate of either sexual or general recidivism between juveniles who commit sexual offenses against peer or adult victims and those who commit sexual offenses against child victims.

The observed sexual recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses range from about 7 percent to 13 percent after 59 months, depending on the study.

Recidivism rates for juveniles who commit sexual offenses are generally lower than those observed for adult sexual offenders.

A relatively small percentage of juveniles who commit a sexual offense will sexually reoffend as adults.

Juveniles who commit sexual offenses have higher rates of general recidivism than sexual recidivism.

Findings from research on the recidivism of adult sexual offenders may be found in [chapter 5](#) in the Adult section (upon which the organization of this chapter is based). Finally, it should be noted that for ease in reading, data presented in this chapter have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

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Issues To Consider

The following measurement issues, which can impact the recidivism rates observed in studies, should be considered when reviewing the findings presented in this chapter:

- **Recidivism rates are not true reoffense rates.** As noted above, recidivism rates are typically based on official criminal or juvenile justice records pertaining to an arrest, criminal adjudication or conviction, or commitment or incarceration. These records do not include any of the substantial number of sexual offenses that do not come to the attention of criminal or juvenile justice authorities. For example, Bachman (1998) found that only about one in four rapes or sexual assaults were reported to police, and Tjaden and Thoennes (2006) found that only 19 percent of women and 13 percent of men who were raped since their 18th birthday reported the rape to the police. Child victims report at an even lower rate. Even when a sex crime is reported to police, relatively few are cleared by arrest and even fewer result in a conviction/adjudication or incarceration. In a prospective study of adolescents, for example, Grotzinger and Elliot (2002) found that the rate of arrest for those who reported committing a sexual offense was between 3 and 10 percent, depending on the severity of the sex crime (Grotzinger & Elliott, 2002). Therefore, observed recidivism rates for juveniles who commit sexual offenses likely underrepresent the true incidence of reoffense for this population, particularly for sexual crimes.
- **Recidivism rates are often calculated differently from one study to the next.** Different recidivism measures such as rearrest, readjudication as a juvenile or reconviction as an adult, and recommitment (for juveniles) or reincarceration (for adults) can produce different recidivism rates, as can variations in the length of the followup period used in a particular study. This makes cross-study comparisons of recidivism rates difficult. Studies using rearrest as a recidivism measure will typically produce higher observed recidivism rates than studies using readjudication or recommitment because only a subset of all arrests ultimately end in adjudication or commitment. Similarly, studies employing longer followup periods will tend to produce higher observed recidivism rates because the offenders being studied will have more time to reoffend and more time to be identified as a recidivist by authorities.

Differences in juvenile research populations may also lead to different recidivism results. Juveniles who have been released from a residential or correctional facility may be fundamentally different from those placed under community supervision in terms of overall risk for recidivism. Similarly, much of the juvenile recidivism literature involves youth of vastly different ages. There are significant differences between an 11-year-old and a 17-year-old, and the age of the juveniles in a study sample should be considered when interpreting individual study results or when making cross-study comparisons.

- **Recidivism rates for juvenile females who commit sexual offenses are relatively unknown.** Most studies of juveniles who commit sexual offenses employ samples or populations that are exclusively or predominantly male. Even those studies that do include females do not necessarily identify the unique recidivism rate for this population. Therefore, knowledge about recidivism for juvenile females remains obscure at this time, and the findings presented in this review should only be considered relevant for juvenile males.

Both underreporting and measurement variation need to be considered when interpreting findings presented in this review of recidivism research. Recognizing that the observed recidivism rates for juveniles who commit sexual offenses are not true reoffense rates will help ensure that risk to public safety is not underestimated. Understanding how differences across research studies may impact recidivism findings can also assist policymakers and practitioners in avoiding interpretation errors and in identifying the most appropriate intervention strategies.

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Summary of Research Findings

Empirical data on the recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses come from two broad categories of research—single studies and meta-analyses. Single studies typically examine the recidivism rates of a group of juveniles at the end of one or more specified followup periods using one or more recidivism measures. Meta-analyses, on the other hand, examine the results of many different individual studies to arrive at an overall conclusion about a particular issue, such as the likelihood of recidivism. They employ statistical procedures that effectively combine the results of many single studies into one large study that includes all of the single studies and subjects. This approach helps the analyst overcome problems in single studies created by small sample sizes and the use of different recidivism measures or followup periods. Findings from both single studies and meta-analyses are presented below.

Pre-1980s Single Studies

As noted above, little was known about juveniles who commit sexual offenses prior to the mid-1980s, as little attention and arguably even less research were focused on this population. However, a handful of studies undertaken many years ago suggested that the recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses were extremely low. One such study from the 1940s reviewed the recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses without ($n = 108$) and with ($n = 146$) concurrent histories of nonsexual offenses. Those without a history of nonsexual offenses have been referred to as "exclusive offenders" or "specialists," and those with a history of nonsexual offenses have been referred to as "mixed offenders" or "generalists." The study found rates of recidivism, as defined as a sexual rearrest, of 2 percent for the exclusive juveniles and 10 percent for the mixed juveniles (Doshay, 1943, as cited in Schram, Milloy, & Rowe, 1991).

A second pre-1980s study focused on juveniles ages 7-16 seen by the Toronto Juvenile Court between 1939 and 1948 ($n= 116$). Juvenile males who committed sexual offenses were returned to court for a new general criminal charge at a 41-percent rate (3 percent for sexual recidivism), as compared to a 55-percent rate of return to court for juveniles who committed nonsexual offenses (Atcheson & Williams, 1954).

Historical Studies of Adult Sexual Offenders: Sexual History Interviews

As noted above, very few studies focused on juveniles who commit sexual offenses were undertaken prior to the 1980s, and very little attention arguably was paid to this population by juvenile justice policymakers and practitioners. That all began to change, however, when a series of retrospective studies based on sexual history interviews with adult sex offenders was conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In these studies, adult sex offenders self-reported a significant, previously unidentified history of sexual offending, which included sexual offending as a juvenile. For example, 24 to 75 percent of the adult sex offenders reported committing sexual offenses that were unidentified by authorities and 24 to 36 percent reported sexual offending that began when the respondent was a juvenile. In one of the studies (Longo & Groth, 1983), adult sexual offenders reported a juvenile history of indecent exposure and voyeurism, suggesting that juveniles who commit less severe sex crimes can progress to committing more serious adult sex offenses. Despite their limitations, these studies played a significant role in shifting policy and practice. Juveniles who commit sexual offenses began to be viewed as budding adult sex offenders, and efforts to intervene with this population began to be based on the assumption that they were fundamentally similar to adults who were engaged in sex offending behavior (see, for example, Groth, 1977; Groth, Longo, & McFadin, 1982; Longo & Groth, 1983; Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991).

Practitioners and policymakers arguably misinterpreted findings from retrospective studies of adult sexual offenders by assuming that most juveniles who commit sexual offenses will continue to commit sexual offenses as adults if left unchecked. What was missing at that time was a forward-looking perspective that began with juveniles who commit sexual offenses and that examined the proportion of juveniles who commit sexual offenses who go on to recidivate later in life (examining their rates and patterns of recidivism later in life). However, the information presented above is exclusively focused on those who did report this progression from juvenile to adult sexual offenders and did not study those juveniles who did not engage in adult sexual offending. Further, no prospective recidivism data are offered on the adult sexual offenders in these studies, so much appeared to be unknown about the impact of juvenile sexual offending at that time. This outcome is an example of how studies can be misinterpreted and lead to inaccurate policies. As a result of these data, however, the assumption that juveniles who commit sexual offenses are the same as adult sexual offenders would become the subject of debate and study over the next two decades.

Prospective National Youth Sample That Included Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses

The National Youth Survey is an ongoing longitudinal study that began in 1976. The study has followed over time a nationally representative sample of 1,725 youth who were ages 11-17 in 1976, surveying them about their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs regarding various topics, including violence and offending. Members of the original study sample are now adults, and both they and their family members have been surveyed in recent waves of the study; hence, the study is now called the National Youth Survey Family Study.

In the 1992 survey wave (the latest for which relevant sexual offending data were collected), 6 percent of the sample reported having committed a sexual assault ($n= 90$), which was defined as youth who reported one sexual assault during the initial first three waves of data collection, and 2 percent of the sample reported having committed a serious sexual assault ($n= 41$), which was defined as youth who reported two or more sexual assaults during the same timeframe. In addition, 70 percent of those acknowledging a sexual offense reported the onset to have been prior to age 18. It should be noted that only 3 percent of the sexual assaulters, as defined above, reported being arrested for the crime, while 10 percent of the serious sexual assaulters, as defined above, reported being arrested. In terms of recidivism, 58 percent of those youth committing a sexual assault reported committing a subsequent sexual assault. Of the serious sexual assaulters, 78 percent reported committing another serious sexual assault. The rate of general reoffense was reported at 99 percent for those youth who committed a sexual offense. Finally, in terms of adult sexual assaults, 10 percent of those who committed a sexual assault as a juvenile also committed an adult sexual offense, while 17 percent of those who committed a serious sexual assault as a juvenile also committed an adult sexual offense (Grotspeter & Elliott, 2002).

While this research provides valuable insights about both the extent of sexual offending within the juvenile population and the recidivism of juveniles who commit sexual offenses, it is important to keep the following in mind when interpreting the study's findings:

- The data produced in the study are based on self-reports.
- The juveniles who reported sexual reoffenses were generally not subject to juvenile justice system intervention; therefore, the impact of such a mediating factor on sexual recidivism is unknown.

Large-Scale Systematic Reviews, Including Meta-Analyses

As mentioned above, meta-analysis is a statistical technique that allows the analyst to synthesize the results of many individual studies. One feature of meta-analysis that is helpful for studying recidivism is its ability to generate an average recidivism rate based on a large number of offenders pooled from many different studies. Findings from three relevant meta-analyses of recidivism studies are presented below.

The first meta-analysis synthesized findings from 79 studies involving 10,988 study subjects overall. The studies were undertaken between 1943 and 1996. The overall sample consisted of 1,025 juveniles who had committed a sexual offense. The average sexual recidivism rate for juveniles who had committed sexual offenses was 5 percent for those studies with 1 year of followup, 22 percent for those studies with

3 years of followup, and 7 percent for those studies with 5 or more years of followup (Alexander, 1999).

A second meta-analysis involved 9 studies and 2,986 subjects, all of whom were juveniles who had committed a sexual offense. The vast majority of study subjects (2,604) were male. Based on an average followup period of 59 months, the study found a sexual recidivism rate of 13 percent, a nonsexual violent recidivism rate of 25 percent, and a nonsexual and nonviolent recidivism rate of 29 percent for study subjects (Reitzel & Carbonell, 2006).

The third meta-analysis reviewed involved 63 studies and a combined sample of 11,219 juveniles who committed sexual offenses. Recidivism was measured over a mean followup period of 59 months. The study found a weighted mean sexual recidivism rate of 7 percent and a weighted mean general recidivism rate of 43 percent for study subjects (Caldwell, 2010).

Single Studies

A number of single studies have examined the recidivism rates of juveniles who have committed a sexual offense. These studies have focused on offender populations from various intervention settings. In some studies, for example, the subjects have been released from a correctional institution or residential placement; in others, the subjects have been on community supervision. Since these variations in settings may reflect differential levels of risk for recidivism among study subjects, this review reports findings from studies focused on juveniles released from an institutional placement separately from those derived from studies focused on juveniles released from a community-based setting.

Rather than presenting findings and study characteristics in narrative form, tables are used to summarize key features of each study's sample and to present sexual and general recidivism rate findings.¹ Many, but not all, of the studies identified the gender of sample members (the tables note gender if identified in the study). Keep in mind that many of the studies summarized in these tables do not provide detailed information about the type of intervention used, the risk level of the sample, the ages of sample members, and other contextual factors that are needed to make cross-study comparisons and to properly interpret recidivism results. These contextual factors can help explain variations in reported recidivism rates often found across different studies. Hence, caution is urged when making cross-study comparisons or when drawing inferences from the data.

Correctional or Residential Intervention Settings

Table 1 presents key characteristics and findings from eight studies that examined the recidivism rates of juveniles who committed sexual offenses and who were released from correctional and residential settings. Some researchers have questioned whether juveniles placed in residential or correctional intervention and treatment settings are a higher risk population than juveniles in community-based settings. However, risk was not typically quantified in most of the single studies reviewed. Therefore, it cannot necessarily be assumed that the studies in table 1 focused exclusively on high-risk subjects.

Table 1: Recidivism Rates for Juveniles Who Committed Sexual Offenses and Were Released From Correctional or Residential Settings

Sample Size	Year of Release or Offense	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism (%)	General Recidivism (%)	Study Authors
197 males	1984	5 years	12 (rearrest)	51 (rearrest)	Schram, Milloy, & Rowe, 1991 ^a
21 males	1990–2003	As of December 2005	38 (reconviction)	71 (reconviction)	Milloy, 2006 ^b
256 juveniles	1992–1998	5 years	5 (rearrest)	53 (rearrest)	Waite et al., 2005 ^c
86 males	1993–1995	4 years	8 (rearrest)	47 (rearrest)	Miner, 2002
319 (305 males and 14 females)	1995–2002	5 years	9 (reconviction)	60 (reconviction)	Barnoski, 2008 ^d
22 juveniles	2001	5 years	41 (rearrest)	77 (rearrest)	Rodriguez-Labarca & O'Connell, 2007 ^e
104 (103 males and 1 female)	2004	3 years	2 (reincarceration for any new offense or technical violation)	23 (reincarceration for any new offense or technical violation)	Garner, 2007

^a The researchers noted that the greater risk was during the first year post-treatment when sample members were still juveniles. It was also noted that juveniles in institutional settings were more likely to recidivate than those in the community.

^b This study focused on youth who were discharged from their sentence and referred for civil commitment evaluation based on risk and dangerousness, but who were ultimately not so committed.

^c Juveniles in this study were specifically identified as high risk.

^d Forty-one of these juveniles were classified as higher risk (level III), while 278 were classified as lower risk (levels I and II) via registration status assessment. The sexual recidivism rate for the higher risk juveniles was 12 percent while the sexual recidivism rate for the lower risk juveniles was 9 percent.

^e Juveniles in this study were determined to be high risk.

^f Between 4 and 5 percent of the juveniles were recommitted to the juvenile justice system, but none were incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system.

Sample Size	Year of Release or Offense	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism (%)	General Recidivism (%)	Study Authors
110 juveniles	2001	1 year	0 (rearrest)	38 (rearrest)	Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, 2007 ^f

^a The researchers noted that the greater risk was during the first year post-treatment when sample members were still juveniles. It was also noted that juveniles in institutional settings were more likely to recidivate than those in the community.

^b This study focused on youth who were discharged from their sentence and referred for civil commitment evaluation based on risk and dangerousness, but who were ultimately not so committed.

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^e Juveniles in this study were determined to be high risk.

^f Between 4 and 5 percent of the juveniles were recommitted to the juvenile justice system, but none were incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system.

Overall, the reported rates of recidivism for juveniles released from a correctional or residential setting varied considerably across studies. Sexual recidivism rates ranged from a low of 0 percent after 1 year of followup to a high of 41 percent after 5 years of followup, while general recidivism rates ranged from 23 percent (based on reincarceration) after 3 years of followup to 77 percent after 5 years of followup. It is unclear whether the juveniles in these studies were also provided treatment, but most correctional and residential programs provide treatment.

Community-Based Intervention Settings

Table 2 presents key characteristics and findings from 13 studies that examined the recidivism rates of juveniles who committed sexual offenses and who were in community-based settings. Again, risk was not typically quantified in most of the single studies reviewed; therefore, it cannot automatically be assumed that the following studies involve subjects who are exclusively low risk.

Table 2: Recidivism Rates for Juveniles Who Committed Sexual Offenses and Were Released From Community-Based Settings

Sample Size	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism (%)	General Recidivism (%)	Study Authors
220 males	55 months	15 (rearrest)	51 (rearrest)	Gretton et al., 2001 ^a
155 males	Unknown	3 (reconviction)	19 (reconviction)	Lab, Shields, & Schondel, 1993
75 juveniles	1 year	4 (reconviction)	7 (reconviction)	Prentky et al., 2000
170 (167 males and 3 females)	5 years ^b	14 (readjudication)	54 (readjudication)	Rasmussen, 1999
122 males	18 years	4 (rearrest)	N/A	Seabloom et al., 2003
112 males	29 months	14 (rearrest)	35 (rearrest)	Smith & Monastersky, 1986
300 males	3–6 years after age 18	4 (rearrest)	53 (rearrest)	Vandiver, 2006
366 juveniles	18–35 months	4 (rearrest)	31–51 (rearrest)	Wiebush, 1996 ^c
266 juveniles	18 months	1 (reconviction)	17 (reconviction)	Barnoski, 1997
303 males	7 years	25 (rearrest)	79 (rearrest)	Nisbet, Wilson, & Smallbone, 2005 ^d
46 (44 males and 2 females)	5 years	20 (reconviction)	65 (reconviction)	Langstrom & Grann, 2000 ^e
359 males	10 years	12 (reconviction)	53 (reconviction)	Rojas & Gretton, 2007 ^f
148 (139 males and 9 females)	16 years	16 (rearrest)	N/A	Worling, Littlejohn, & Bookalam, 2010 ^g

^a Juveniles with higher levels of psychopathy had significantly higher levels of sexual recidivism than juveniles with lower levels of psychopathy ($p < .05$).

^b This study followed juveniles who committed sexual offenses until they reached age 19.

^c The author looked at several different samples and did not report a general recidivism rate across all samples.

^d The authors noted that once the sample reached adulthood, the sexual recidivism rate was 9 percent and the general recidivism rate was 61 percent.

^e This study consisted of juveniles ages 15–20 in Sweden who received a court-ordered evaluation. Thus, the sample included both community-based and residential or correctional populations.

^f The authors compared Canadian aboriginal ($n = 102$) to nonaboriginal (257) juveniles who committed sexual offenses and found that aboriginal youth had a significantly higher ($p < .01$) sexual recidivism rate (21 percent) than nonaboriginal youth (9 percent).

^g The authors noted that the adult sexual recidivism rate was 11 percent. In addition, the study found a nonsexual, violent recidivism rate of 32 percent; a nonviolent, nonsexual recidivism rate of 43 percent; and a recidivism rate of 49 percent for any crime (overall general recidivism was not specifically noted).

Again, the reported rates of recidivism vary across studies. Sexual recidivism rates for the juveniles released from a community-based setting ranged from a low of 1 percent (based on reconviction) after 18 months of followup to a high of 25 percent after 7 years of followup, while general recidivism rates ranged from a low of 7 percent (based on reconviction) after 1 year of followup to a high of 79 percent after 7 years of followup. These reported rates of recidivism do not vary greatly from the rates of recidivism found for those juveniles released from correctional and residential settings. Interestingly, a similar pattern is discernible in the recidivism rates found for juveniles from different intervention settings by Alexander (1999) in her meta-analysis. In that study, a sexual recidivism rate of 6 percent was found for juveniles from community-based supervision settings (e.g., probation), a rate of 7 percent was found for juveniles from prison, and a rate of 9 percent was found for juveniles from hospital settings (Alexander, 1999).

Although it is difficult to base firm conclusions on these data, the relative similarity in observed recidivism rates found across different intervention settings indirectly suggests that (1) the risk levels of youth from different settings may not be appreciably different, and therefore (2) appropriate intervention placement based on assessed risk may not have been occurring at the time these studies were undertaken. Given the importance of reserving more intensive interventions and services for high-risk offenders, these hypotheses and their relevance for contemporary sex offender management practice arguably should be tested in a more direct and rigorous manner.

Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses, by Victim Type

Some recidivism studies that have focused on juveniles who have committed a sexual offense have differentiated offenders who victimize younger children (child molestation) from those who victimize peers or adults (rape). Table 3 presents key characteristics and findings from seven studies that examined the recidivism rates of juveniles who committed rape and/or child molestation.

Table 3: Recidivism Rates for Juveniles Who Committed Rape and/or Child Molestation Offenses

Sample Size	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism (%)		General Recidivism (%)		Study Authors
		Child Molestation	Rape	Child Molestation	Rape	
223 males	4.3 years	5.6 (new charge)	1.5 (new charge)	32.6 (new charge)	45.5 (new charge)	Aebi et al., 2012*
176 males	1 & 2 years	0 (rearrest)	3.33 (rearrest)	7.94 (rearrest)	30 (rearrest)	Faniff & Kolko, 2012*
100 males	2–5 years	8 (reconviction)	10 (reconviction)	38 (reconviction)	54 (reconviction)	Hagan & Cho, 1996*
50 males	10 years	N/A	16 (reconviction)	N/A	90 (reconviction)	Hagan & Gust-Brey, 1999
150 males	8 years	20 (reconviction)	16 (reconviction)	N/A	N/A	Hagan et al., 2001
296 males	5 years	8 (rearrest)	1 (rearrest)	41 (rearrest)	46 (rearrest)	Kemper & Kistner, 2007
156 males	134 months	4	10	32	28	Parks & Bard, 2006

* The differences were not statistically significant.

Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the data, there does not appear to be a significant difference in the rate of either sexual or general recidivism between juveniles who commit sexual offenses against peer or adult victims and those who commit sexual offenses against child victims, based on the results of these studies. It is interesting to note, however, that Alexander's (1999) meta-analysis of earlier studies produced somewhat similar findings. Alexander found an average sexual recidivism rate of 6 percent for those juveniles who commit rape and an average sexual recidivism rate of 2 percent for those who molested a child—a difference that was not statistically significant.

"Research has not found a significant difference in sexual recidivism between juveniles who commit sexual offenses against peer or adult victims and those who commit sexual offenses against child victims."

Juveniles Who Commit Sexual and Nonsexual Offenses

Studies have also compared the recidivism rates of juveniles who have committed sexual offenses exclusively (specialists) with those of juveniles who have either committed both sexual and nonsexual/general offenses (generalists), or those who have only committed nonsexual, general offenses. Table 4 presents the key characteristics and findings of Chu and Thomas' (2010) study that reported comparative recidivism data for specialists and generalists. This is one of the few recent studies reporting this type of data found in the literature. Table 5 presents key characteristics and findings from seven studies that reported comparative recidivism data for juveniles who committed sexual offenses and juveniles who committed nonsexual, general offenses.

Table 4: Recidivism Rates for Juveniles Who Committed Sexual Offenses Exclusively (Specialists) and Those Who Committed Sexual and Nonsexual Offenses (Generalists)

Sample Size	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism (%)		General Recidivism (%)		Study Authors
		Specialists	Generalists	Specialists	Generalists	
156 males	57-68 months	10 (reconviction)	14 (reconviction)	24 (reconviction)	46 (reconviction)	Chu & Thomas, 2010

Note: The difference in the sexual recidivism rate between specialists and generalists is not statistically significant, but the difference in the general recidivism rate (any recidivism) between the two groups is statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Table 5: Recidivism Rates for Juveniles Who Committed Sexual Offenses and Those Who Committed Nonsexual, General Offenses

Sample Size	Followup Period	Sexual Recidivism (%)		General Recidivism (%)		Study Authors
		Sexual Offenses	General Offenses	Sexual Offenses	General Offenses	
150 males	8 years	18 (reconviction)	10 (reconviction)	N/A	N/A	Hagan et al., 2001 ^a
110 juveniles	33 months	2	0	32	16	Brannon & Troyer, 1991
2,029 males	5 years	7 (charge)	6 (charge)	74 (charge)	80 (charge)	Caldwell, 2007 ^b
1,645 juveniles	4 years	2 (charge)	3 (charge)	N/A	N/A	Letourneau, Chapman, & Schoenwald, 2008 ^c
256 males	3 years	0 (reconviction)	1 (reconviction)	44 (reconviction)	58 (reconviction)	Milloy, 1994 ^d
306 males	6 years	10 (rearrest)	3 (rearrest)	32 (rearrest)	44 (rearrest)	Sipe, Jensen, & Everett, 1998 ^e
3,129 males	4-14 years after adulthood	9 (rearrest)	6 (rearrest)	N/A	N/A	Zimring, Piquero, & Jennings, 2007 ^f

^a The difference was statistically significant ($p > .05$).

^b The difference in sexual recidivism was not statistically significant, but the difference in general recidivism was statistically significant ($p > .01$).

^c The difference was not statistically significant.

^d The differences were not statistically significant.

^e The difference for sexual recidivism was statistically significant ($p > .04$), but the general recidivism rate was not significant.

^f The difference was not statistically significant. The researchers concluded that the number of juvenile police contacts was far more predictive of future adult sex offenses.

^g The authors noted that the adult sexual recidivism rate was 11 percent. In addition, the study found a nonsexual, violent recidivism rate of 32 percent; a nonviolent, nonsexual recidivism rate of 43 percent; and a recidivism rate of 49 percent for any crime (overall general recidivism was not specifically noted).

In the Chu and Thomas (2010) study comparing specialists and generalists, no significant difference in sexual recidivism was found between the two groups. However, generalists did have a significantly higher rate of general recidivism than specialists. In fact, their rates of both violent and nonviolent recidivism were also significantly higher than the rate for specialists.

On the other hand, comparisons involving juveniles who commit sexual offenses with those who commit nonsexual, general offenses produced mixed results. Some studies found that juveniles who commit sexual offenses had significantly higher rates of sexual and general recidivism than their general-offending juvenile counterparts, while others did not. Given the inconsistent findings, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the propensity of one group to recidivate relative to the other.

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Summary

Drawing sound conclusions about the recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses can be difficult due to a number of factors. Since many sex offenses are never reported to law enforcement or cleared by arrest, the observed recidivism rates of juveniles remain underestimates of actual reoffending. Measurement variation across studies, small sample sizes, short followup periods, and missing information about the characteristics of the sample studied and the interventions study subjects were exposed to make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the available data. Still, findings from recent research provide important insights regarding the sexual and general recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses. Key conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical evidence are outlined below:

- **The observed sexual recidivism rates of juveniles who commit sexual offenses range from about 7 to 13 percent after 59 months, depending on the study.** Although the sexual recidivism rates reported in single studies tend to vary significantly because different methods and

followup periods are employed across studies, findings from meta-analyses suggest that juveniles who commit sexual offenses have a sexual recidivism rate ranging from 7 to 13 percent after 59 months, depending on the recidivism measure employed. In addition, there is empirical evidence indicating that the percentage of juveniles who commit sexual offenses who go on to sexually offend as adults is similarly low. Hence, policies and practices designed to address juvenile sexual offending should recognize that the potential for desistance prior to adulthood is substantial.

- **Recidivism rates for juveniles who commit sexual offenses are generally lower than those observed for adult sexual offenders.**

For example, in a 2004 meta-analysis, Harris and Hanson found average sexual recidivism rates for adult offenders of 14 percent after a 5-year followup period, 20 percent after a 10-year followup period, and 24 percent after a 15-year followup period (Harris & Hanson, 2004). Hence, recidivism data suggest that there may be fundamental differences between juveniles who commit sexual offenses and adult sexual offenders, particularly in their propensity to sexually reoffend. **Given the above, the national experts at the SOMAPI forum recommended that policymakers and practitioners not equate the two groups.**

"Observed sexual recidivism rates range from about 7 to 13 percent. These rates are generally lower than the rates observed for adult sex offenders."

- **A relatively small percentage of juveniles who commit a sexual offense will sexually reoffend as adults.** The message for policymakers is that juveniles who commit sexual offenses are not the same as adult sexual offenders, and that all juveniles who commit a sexual offense do not go on to sexually offend later in life.
- **Juveniles who commit sexual offenses have higher rates of general recidivism than sexual recidivism.** Although this basic recidivism pattern would naturally be expected to occur, the magnitude of the difference found in research is somewhat striking. It suggests that juveniles who commit sexual offenses may have more in common with other juveniles who commit delinquent acts than with adult sexual offenders, and interventions need to account for the risk of general recidivism. However, policymakers and practitioners should also keep in mind that nonsexual offenses are more likely than sexual offenses to be reported to law enforcement, and that some crimes legally labeled as nonsexual in the criminal histories of sex offenders may indeed be sexual in their underlying behavior.

Although recent research provides important insights about the recidivism rates of juveniles who sexually offend, significant knowledge gaps and unresolved controversies remain. Variations across studies in the age and risk levels of sample members, the intervention setting, the operational definition of recidivism, the length of the followup period employed, and other measurement factors continue to make cross-study comparisons of observed recidivism rates difficult. Interpreting disparate findings and their implications for policy and practice also remains a challenge.

"Juveniles who commit sexual offenses have higher rates of general recidivism than sexual recidivism."

While the operational definitions and followup periods employed in recidivism research for juveniles who commit sexual offenses will largely be dictated by the available data, the SOMAPI forum participants identified the need for recidivism studies that produce more readily comparable findings. Studies employing followup periods that are long enough to capture sexual and nonsexual recidivism during adulthood are also needed. Future research should also attempt to build a stronger evidence base on the differential recidivism patterns of different types of juveniles who commit sexual and/or nonsexual offenses. Finally, recidivism research on juvenile females who commit sexual offenses is greatly needed.

SOMAPI forum participants also identified the need for more policy-relevant research on the absolute and relative risks that different types of juveniles who commit sexual offenses pose. The literature to date on recidivism for this population has thus far been unable to decisively identify the specific risk posed by juveniles and its meaning for public safety policy. There is little question that policies and practices aimed at the reduction of recidivism would be far more effective and cost-beneficial if they better aligned with the empirical evidence; however, bridging the gap is plagued by both measurement problems associated with true rates of reoffending and the tendency on the part of policymakers and members of the public to equate juveniles with adult sexual offenders even though the current research does not support this conclusion.

Given the above, **the SOMAPI forum participants offered the following recommendations:**

- **Juveniles who commit sexual offenses should not be labeled as sexual offenders for life.** The recidivism research suggests that most juveniles do not continue on to commit future juvenile or adult sexual offenses. Therefore, labeling juveniles as sex offenders legally or otherwise—particularly for life—is likely to result in harm for many juveniles without a commensurate public safety benefit. The empirical evidence suggests that sexual offending prior to age 18 is not necessarily indicative of an ongoing and future risk for sexual offending. Moreover, the unintended but nevertheless harmful effects of inappropriate labeling have repeatedly been identified in other research. Therefore, this population should be referred to and treated as juveniles who commit sexual offenses, rather than juvenile sex offenders.
- **All policies designed to reduce sexual recidivism for juveniles who commit sexual offenses should be evaluated in terms of both their effectiveness and their potential iatrogenic effects on juveniles, their families, and the community.** Evaluations using scientifically rigorous research designs that examine the intended and unintended effects of policies and interventions aimed at juveniles who sexually offend should be undertaken and adequately funded.

- **Intervention policies should be individualized based on the unique risk and needs of each juvenile who commits a sexual offense. One-size-fits-all policies should be avoided.** Juveniles who sexually offend are a heterogeneous population, and intervention strategies aimed at this population should be similarly diverse. Some juveniles who commit sexual offenses certainly warrant management and treatment using methods similar to adult sexual offenders, but others may not be responsive to such methods.
- **Intervention efforts should be concerned with preventing both sexual recidivism and general recidivism.** Juveniles who sexually offend are more likely to recidivate with a nonsexual rather than a sexual offense. Hence, treatment and supervision efforts should be concerned with both types of reoffending.
- **Sex offender management policies commonly used with adult sex offenders should not automatically be used with juveniles who commit sexual offenses. Empirical evidence concerning both the effectiveness and potential unintended consequences of policies (such as registration and notification, residence restrictions, polygraph, and GPS monitoring) should be carefully considered before they are applied to juvenile populations.** (For more information on the "Registration and Notification of Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses," see [chapter 6](#) in the Juvenile section.) The effectiveness of these policies with adult sex offenders remains questionable, and there is even less empirical evidence suggesting that they work with juveniles. Jurisdictions should carefully consider the empirical evidence and weigh the costs and benefits for all stakeholders before any of the above management strategies are expanded or applied with juveniles. Research has begun to show that fundamental differences exist between juveniles who commit sexual offenses and adult sexual offenders, and that juveniles who sexually offend may have more in common with juveniles who commit nonsexual offenses. This information should be used by policymakers and practitioners to develop rehabilitation and management strategies that are effective, appropriate, and fair.

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Notes

¹ In this chapter's tables, general recidivism reflects all identified nonsexual recidivism in the study. However, general recidivism rates may or may not include all nonsexual crimes, as some studies only counted certain types of nonsexual crimes when calculating the general recidivism rate. In addition, some juveniles may be counted twice as general recidivists, as they may have new criminal offenses in multiple categories (e.g., violent, nonsexual; nonviolent, nonsexual; any crime). The recidivism columns of these tables generally note what the recidivism rate was based on (e.g., rearrest, reincarceration); the "reconviction" label includes (1) readjudication as a juvenile or reconviction as an adult, or (2) recommitment as a juvenile or reincarceration as an adult in conjunction with readjudication or reconviction.

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