Factors related to recidivism among released federal sex offenders (R-49, 1996)

This study examines the predictive value of systematically assessing and re-assessing sex offender risk. In continuing examinations of sex offender case histories in federal corrections, a follow-up sample was assembled of 570 sex offenders, 329 who were on "caseload" (already under community supervision) and 241 who were "new releases" and subsequently followed up. The average time served in federal custody until release for caseload and new releases (3.2 and 3.6 years, respectively) did not significantly differ.

During the postrelease follow-up period (average 3.5 years), about one third of the sex offenders were convicted of a new criminal offence, nearly one fifth for a violent crime and fewer than one in ten for a new sexual offence. It was also found that among newly released sex offenders, rapists had the highest rates of general, violent and sexual recidivism relative to any other group. In contrast, incest offenders demonstrated the lowest rates of general, violent and sexual recidivism relative to pedophiles or rapists, regardless of whether they belonged to caseload or newly released samples. It is notable that the pedophile group on caseload had the highest rate of sexual recidivism relative to incest offenders or rapists.

A series of chi-square and stepwise regression analyses identified factors that can be used to predict sex offender recidivism. For general and violent recidivism, important predictors were age at release (younger), juvenile history (training school), unemployment (at time of arrest), unstable living arrangement and substance abuse (alcohol and/or drug). For sexual recidivism, the most salient factors were age at release (younger), previous sex offences (federal sentence) and adult drug abuse. While a large number of significant predictors could be found for general and violent recidivism, the low rate of sexual reoffending limited the ability of the study to generate many predictors of sexual recidivism.

The report contends more longitudinal research is required to establish relevant risk factors firmly for sexual recidivism. Given that released sex offenders, as a group, are at risk for committing new crimes other than sex offences, then administering risk assessment procedures which are applied to the general offender population is recommended.

The focus of this research is on how well we can target high risk, violent offenders who require extraordinary restrictions of liberty.