

# Reporting Rates for Sex Offenses and Recidivism and Reoffense Rates of Adult Sex Offenders

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## *Introduction*

The rate of recidivism among adult sex offenders seems to be a controversial topic. Some state that the rate is quite low, others that it is quite high.

The term *recidivism rates* refers to detected or officially recorded sex crimes. The term *reoffense rates* refers to all sex crimes regardless of whether they are detected or officially recorded. Researchers agree that recidivism rates underestimate reoffense rates because most sex crimes go unreported.

*Neither perpetrators nor victims tend to report sex crimes.*

*Victims report only a fraction of sex offenses to authorities.*

Various surveys and research projects have been conducted over the years on the frequency with which victims of sexual assaults report their experiences. Researchers estimate that somewhere between 64% and 99% of sexual assaults are never reported by victims and most studies indicate that fewer than 16% of sex offense victims eventually report their crimes (*Abel and Rouleau, 1990; Besserer and Trainor, 2000; Bolen and Scannapieco, 1999; Cardarelli, 1998; Elliott, 1994; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, and Turner, 2003; Freyd, Putnam, Lyon, Becker-Blease, Cheit, Siegel, and Pezdek, 2005; Kaplan, 1985; National Victims Center and Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, 1992; Ringel, 1997; Russell, 1983; Snyder, 2000*).

In Colorado, it is estimated that 84% of sexual assault cases are never reported to law enforcement (*Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 1998*) and the authors of one study concluded that only 1% of sex offenders' crimes were officially reported to authorities (*Ablmeyer, Heil, McKee, and English, 2000*).

*Many if not most adult sex offenders self report only a fraction of their crimes at the time of their arrest. Many if not most have a long history of committing sex offenses prior to getting caught.*

A number of studies have shown that sex offenders disclose in treatment or in surveys that they committed large numbers of offenses before they were first caught or arrested.

In one of the first large scale studies of sex crimes, Gene Abel and his colleagues reported that adult sex offenders who were guaranteed anonymity disclosed having committed an average of 533 sex offenses

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over a 12-year period before being detected (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, and Rouleau, 1988; Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, and Murphy, 1987). The researchers concluded that “arrest records of paraphiliacs do not provide a reliable indication of the true scope of paraphilic acts” and that “most paraphilic acts are not reported”.

Others have reported similar findings. For example, one study found that rapists given assurances that their responses would remain anonymous reported having six times as many victims as could be identified from official records and each of the child molesters in the study reported having hundreds of previously unknown sexual contacts with children (Weinrott and Saylor, 1991). The authors concluded that there is an “iceberg of undocumented offenses beneath the tip of official records”.

A Colorado study reported that adult sex offenders who were known to have an average of 2 victims at the time of their arrest subsequently report having an average of 184 victims after taking polygraph tests while in treatment (Ahlmeyer, et al., 2000).

Another study found that child molesters eventually report, while in treatment, having committed an average of 88 crimes each (Underwood, Patch, Cappelletty, and Wolfe, 1999). Other researchers have reported that the number of sex offenses disclosed by sex offenders in treatment increased by 3-4x (Emerick and Dutton, 1993) or by 5x (Janes, 1993) following polygraph testing.

*Sex crimes go undetected for years because neither offenders nor victims tend to report sex crimes.*

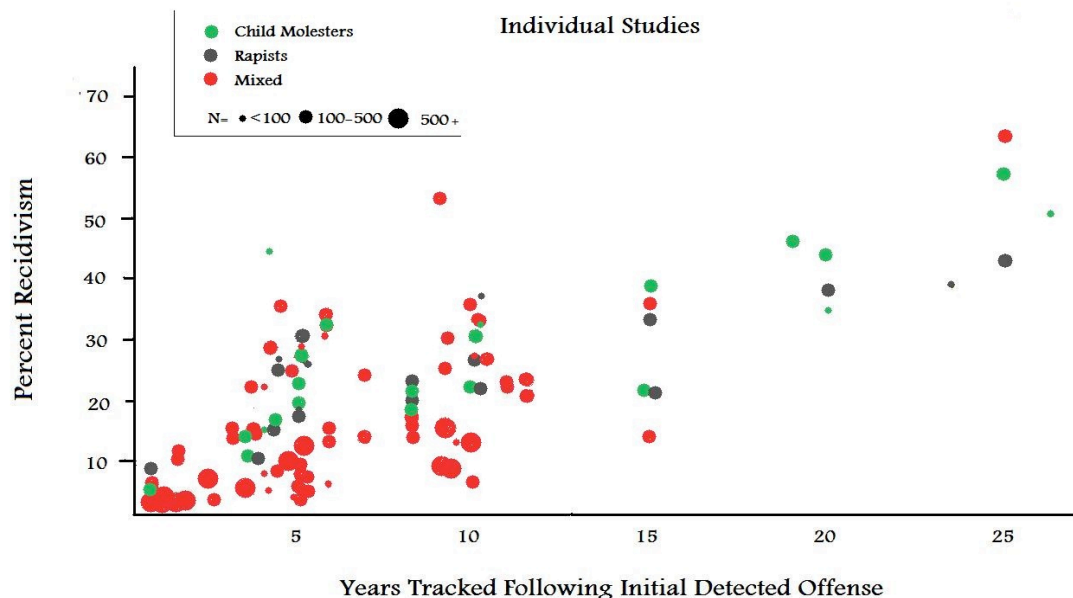
On average, 10 to 16 years elapses between a sex offender’s first sex offense and his first arrest (Abel, et al., 1988; Abel, et al., 1987; Ahlmeyer, et al., 2000). Between 10 and 20 years may elapse between the time an incest victim is first assaulted and the time he or she reports the abuse (Lamb and Edgar-Smith, 1994; Resler and Wind, 1994).

*The recidivism rates for adult sex offenders are high when tracked for several years.*

*Researchers find that recidivism rates steadily increase as offenders are followed for longer periods of time (allowing for a greater probability of detection). But it is also true that many researchers have found fairly high recidivism rates even when offenders are tracked for short periods of time.*

I surveyed 46 recidivism studies of adult sex offenders conducted since 1980 (36 individual studies and 10 meta-analyses; a small number of studies of adolescents were present in some meta-analyses). I do not claim to have reviewed *all* studies but I reviewed those that were easily accessible and I included all I found. I believe I have included the majority of the studies most prominently or frequently cited.

The results of the survey are presented in the two figures below.



**Figure 1**

Figure 1 represents recidivism rates reported in individual studies and Figure 2 represents recidivism rates reported in meta-analyses. Each dot represents a group of offenders (child molesters, rapists, or a mixed group of offenders) tracked by a study for a certain number of years (or an average number of years for some meta-analyses). The size of each “dot” on the graph corresponds to the number of subjects in the study. (A key for identifying which studies contributed groups at each tracking year is found at the end of this article.)

As illustrated in Figure 1, when arrest records are examined over brief periods of time (1-5 years), many researchers find relatively low recidivism rates among adult sex offenders. For example, a study conducted by the Minnesota Department of Corrections found recidivism after one year to be 3% (*Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2007*) and the United States Department of Justice reported recidivism after 3 years to be 5% (*Langan, Schmitt, and Rose, 2003*). Another group found average recidivism rates of 4% after 5 years (*Schwietzer and Dwyer, 2003*). A total of 26 groups of offenders out of 58 (45%) had recidivism rates of 10% or less if tracked for 5 years or less. It should also be noted, however, that 15 groups (26%) had recidivism rates of 21% or higher.

When researchers track offenders for longer periods of time, recidivism rates increase. Only 15 of 58 groups of offenders (26%) had recidivism rates of 21% or greater when tracked for 5 years or less but that 21 of 40 groups of offenders (53%) had recidivism rates of 21% or greater when tracked for 6 to 15 years.

As researchers track offenders for even longer periods of time, recidivism rates increase more noticeably. Of the 18 groups of offenders in our survey tracked for 11 years or more, none had recidivism rates below 10% and only 4 groups of offenders (22%) had recidivism rates of 20% or less. All 8 groups of offenders tracked for 16 years or longer had recidivism rates greater than 30%.

In the few individual studies in which offenders are tracked for over 21 years, recidivism rates are uniformly high. One study found recidivism for a mixed group of offenders to be 48% after 28 years (Hanson, Steffy, and Gauthier, 1993), another found recidivism to be 39% for rapists and 52% for child molesters after 25 years (Prentky, Lee, Knight, and Cerce, 1997), and another found recidivism for a mixed group of offenders to be 61% after 25 years (Langevin, Curnoe, Federoff, Bennett, Langevin, Pever, Pettica, and Sandhu, 2004).

Some studies had larger sample sizes than others and larger sample sizes usually result in more accurate findings. I have represented sample sizes graphically in Figure 1 but it is worth noting that the majority of sample sizes ranged from 100-500 subjects per group although there were a greater number of large sample sizes in studies with shorter follow-up periods (it is easier to track larger numbers of people for short periods of time). For example, 81% of the study groups consisted of 100 subjects or more and 15% consisted of more than 500 subjects when tracked for 5 years or less. While 82% of the study groups consisted of 100 subjects or more when tracked for 11 years or more, no groups consisted of more than 500 subjects when tracked for 11 years or more.

As illustrated in Figure 2, most meta-analyses report recidivism rates ranging from about 10-25% over an averaged follow-up period of about 5 years. For example, one often-quoted study found the average recidivism of sex offenders to be between 13% and 17% after an average of 4 years (Hanson, Gordon, Harris, Marques, Murphy, Quinsey, and Seto, 2002). Another frequently cited meta-analysis found recidivism to be between 13% and 19% after an average of 5 years (Hanson and Brussiere, 1998) and a very recent study found recidivism to be 12% over an average of 6 years (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2009). However, one meta-analysis tracked offenders over time (Hanson, Morton and Harris, 2003) and found recidivism to increase steadily with increasing years (from 14% at 5 years to 27% at 20 years) mirroring the trend seen in individual studies.

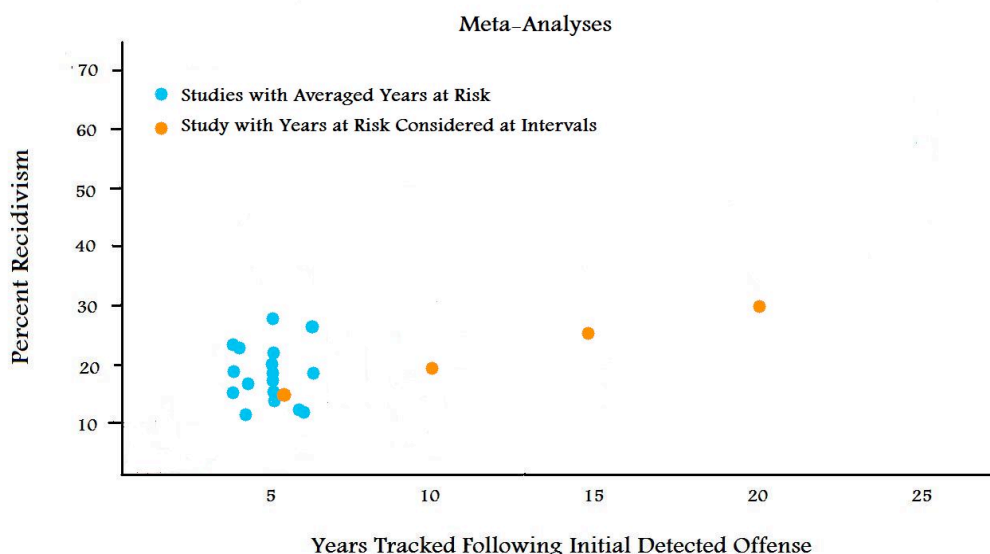


Figure 2

It is also worth noting that some groups in both the individual studies and meta-analyses received treatment prior to being at risk for recidivism and others did not. [Figure 3](#) presents recidivism rates for those individual studies which made direct comparisons between treated and untreated groups (child molesters, rapists, and mixed groups of offenders are combined). [Figure 4](#) presents recidivism rates for the meta-analyses. It is difficult to discern an obvious relationship between treatment and recidivism (this topic is addressed more fully in a separate survey, “The Effectiveness of Treatment for Adult Sex Offenders”).

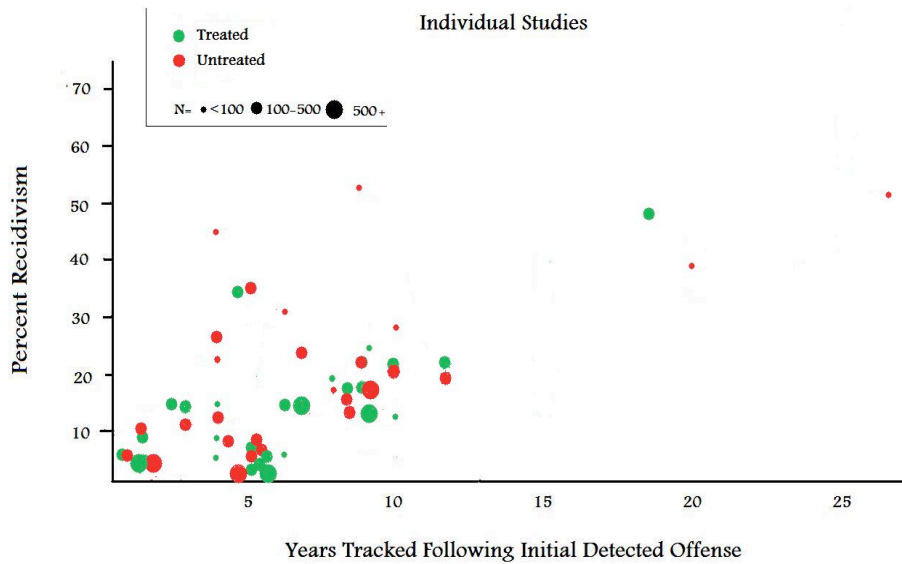


Figure 3

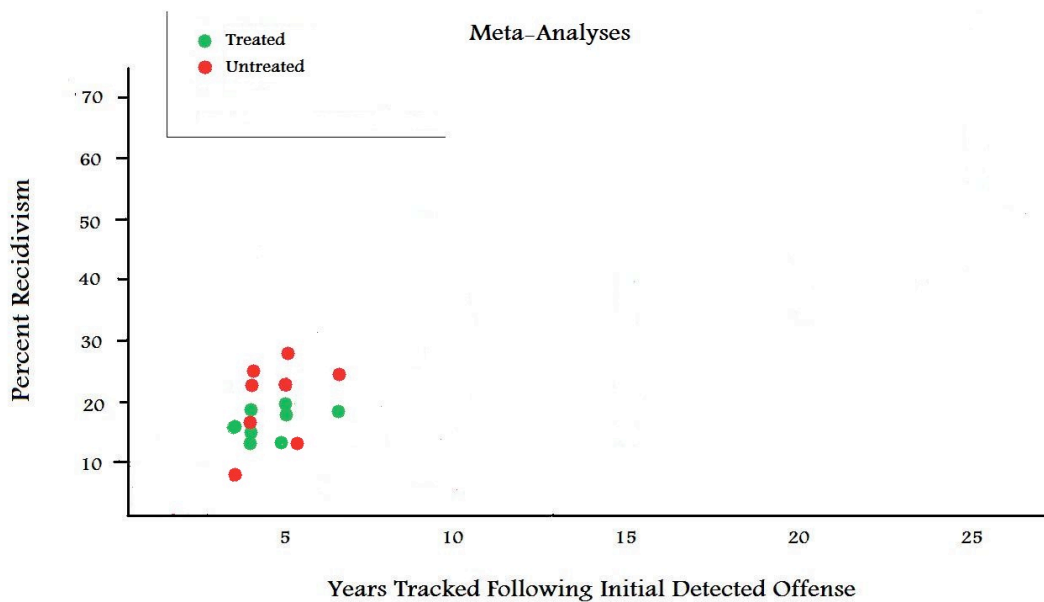


Figure 4

*Because sex crimes aren't often reported by either victims or perpetrators, recidivism rates derived from arrest records are under-estimates the actual number of sex offenses committed by adult sex offenders.*

Polygraph studies, as noted earlier, suggest that actual reoffending rates are probably much higher than recidivism statistics appear to indicate. It is interesting, therefore, to note that Langevin and his colleagues (*Langevin, et al., 2004*) found recidivism among a mixed group of adult sex offenders to be 88% after 25 years if the self-reports of the offenders are included as a measure of recidivism in addition to re-arrest records.

Hanson et al., (*2003*) noted that recidivism rates observed in research studies are “minimal estimates” of actual offending and suggested that a “reasonable” estimate of actual reoffense rates would be *at least* (italics added) 10-15% higher than observed recidivism rates.

In [Figure 5](#), I show what estimated reoffense rates might be if a conservative 15% is added to each recidivism statistic reported from the individual studies shown in Figure 1. A horizontal line has been added at the 50% mark.

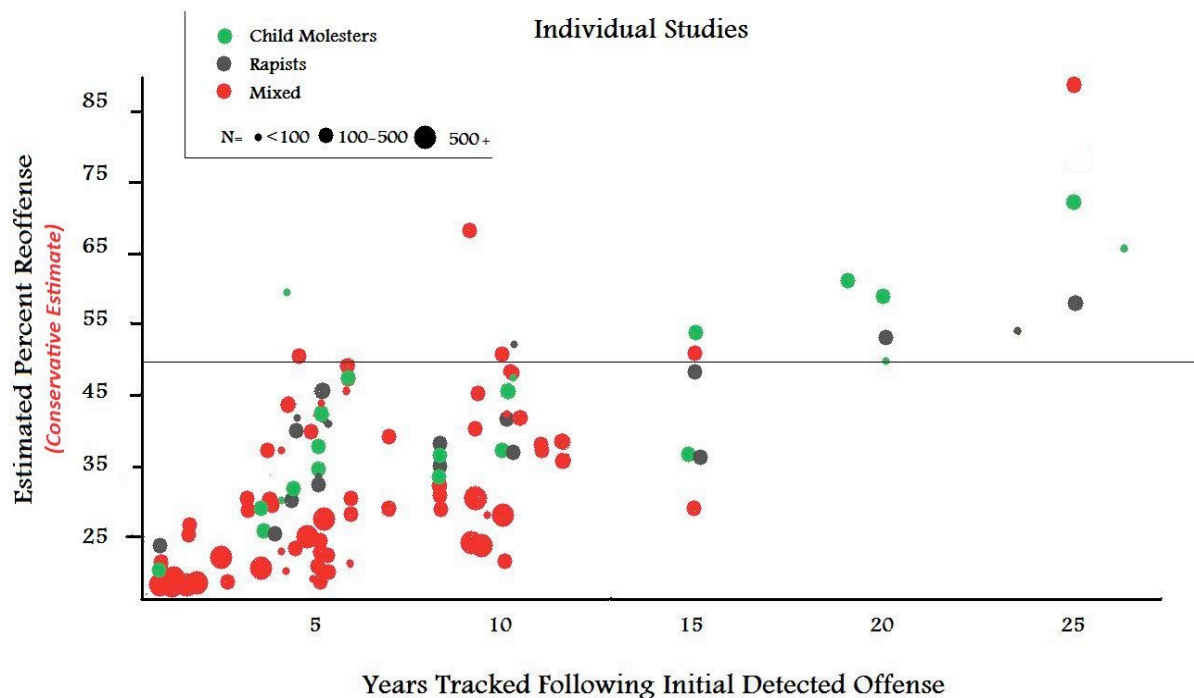


Figure 5

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**Studies Represented at Each Tracking Year**  
**(Individual Studies and Meta-Analyses)**

YEAR	STUDY
1	EE,GG,KK
2	I,EE,GG,KK
3	A,H,W,X,EE,GG,KK
4	C,M,N,DD,EE,KK,LL,NN
5	A,B,D,F,K,O,R,T,U,AA,CC,GG,KK,MM,PP,QQ,SS
6	P,Q,Z,FF,HH,OO
7	J,RR
8	EE,SS
9	E,F,G,BB
10	R,W,GG,II,JJ,KK,SS
11	
12	L,EE
13	
14	
15	R,W,KK
16	
17	
18	
19	S
20	R,S,KK
21	
22	
23	V
24	
25	Y,KK
26	
27	
28	S