

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT and PLANNING INITIATIVE

SMART

Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring,
Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking

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Introduction

by Roger Przybylski and [Scott Matson](#)

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Sex offenders have received considerable attention in recent years from both policymakers and the public. This is due to the profound impact that sex crimes have on victims and the larger community and also due to the increased identification and apprehension of sex offenders. Perpetrators of sex crimes have come to be viewed by policymakers, practitioners, and the public as a unique group of offenders in need of special management practices. As a result, a number of laws and policies focusing specifically on sex offenders have been implemented across the country in recent years, often with extensive public support.

There also has been a growing recognition in the criminal justice community that crime control and prevention strategies—including those targeting sex offenders—are far more likely to be effective and cost-beneficial when they are based on scientific evidence about what works. Indeed, crime control policy and program development processes are increasingly being informed by scientific evidence; in addition, many practices in policing, corrections, and other areas have been and continue to be shaped by evidence generated through research. Incentives and mandates for evidence-based programming are now frequently used by funding sources, and the demand for trustworthy, research-generated evidence about what works is rapidly increasing (Przybylski, 2012).

Recognizing the important role scientific evidence plays in the development and implementation of effective policies and practices, including those focused on sex offenders, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and OJP's Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART Office) began to identify and disseminate information from state-of-the-art research on central and emerging issues in sex offender management to inform policy and practice in the field.

Since 1996, OJP has worked to promote advances in the field of sex offender management. In the 1980s and 1990s, several high-profile sex crimes led to the enactment of state and federal legislation directed toward tracking and controlling sex offenders. These laws were passed without the benefit of strong research to support particular approaches to managing sex offenders. In response to this flurry of legislative activity and heightened public concern, OJP convened a national summit in 1996 that brought together nearly 200 practitioners, academic researchers, and other experts to discuss the most effective management strategies for this offender population.¹ During the summit, OJP received recommendations about the needs of the field regarding sex offender management training and technical assistance. In response to these recommendations, OJP initiated research projects on sex offender management, developed sex offender-specific grant programs, and supported the Center for Sex Offender Management's training and technical assistance to the field.

In the ensuing years, OJP sponsored more than 100 research projects, publications, and training curricula related to sexual assault and sex offender management. Grant programs provided funds to approximately 200 state, local, and tribal jurisdictions to enhance and improve the management of sex offenders in their communities. These jurisdictions have created standards for the treatment and supervision of adults and juveniles, employed sex offender-specific assessment and truth-verification tools, enhanced victim advocacy and support, developed specialized sex offender courts, and improved information sharing and collaboration within and across disciplines and jurisdictions.

In 2006, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (AWA) authorized the establishment of the SMART Office—the first federal office devoted solely to sex offender management-related activities. The office is responsible for helping to implement the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (Title I of AWA) and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals and the public about the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.

Building on OJP's efforts, the SMART Office began work in 2011 on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management and to inform OJP's research and grant-making efforts in this area. As part of this effort, the office gathered information about research and practice in the field and enlisted practitioners to (1) provide details about sex offender management programs and practices that are promising or effective, and (2) identify the needs of the various disciplines involved.

The SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the scholarly literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and to develop annotated summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. To gain insight into emerging issues, promising practices, and pressing needs in the sex offender management field at the state and local levels, NCJA conducted an informal national inventory of sex offender management professionals in 2011. Finally, the SMART Office hosted the Sex Offender Management Research and Practice Discussion Forum (SOMAPI forum) in February 2012. At this event, national experts—both researchers and practitioners—gathered in the District of Columbia to discuss the research summaries and inventory results in order to further refine what is known about the current state of sex offender management, gaps in research and practice, and the needs of the different disciplines involved in this work.² Recommendations from the SOMAPI forum informed this report and will help guide OJP's sex offender management research, policy, and grant-making efforts in the future and provide direction to the field on how best to protect the public from sexual violence.

Organization of the Report

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This report is divided into two main sections. A review of the literature on adult sex offender topics is presented in section 1 and a review of the literature on topics pertaining to juveniles who commit sexual offenses is presented in section 2. Given the fundamental differences between adults and juveniles, it is critically important to distinguish between these two populations when describing their characteristics or discussing research on issues such as etiology, recidivism, risk, or intervention effectiveness.

Section 1: Adult Sex Offenders

This section reviews contemporary research focused specifically on adult sex offenders and presents key findings and policy implications in the following eight topic areas:

1. Incidence and prevalence of sexual offending and victimization.
2. Etiology of sexual offending.
3. Sex offender typologies.
4. Internet-facilitated sexual offending.
5. Recidivism.
6. Risk assessment.
7. Treatment effectiveness.
8. Sex offender management strategies.

Section 2: Juveniles Who Commit Sexual Offenses

This section reviews contemporary research focused specifically on juveniles who commit sexual offenses and presents key findings and policy implications in the following five topic areas:

1. Etiology and typologies.
2. Recidivism.
3. Assessment of risk for sexual reoffense.
4. Treatment effectiveness.
5. Registration and notification.

Chapter Organization

Each topic area addressed in sections 1 and 2 is presented in a separate chapter,³ and all chapters are generally structured in a similar manner. Each begins with a summary of the chapter's key findings followed by a brief introduction to the topic being addressed and, when relevant, a description of the key issues that need to be considered when interpreting research reviewed in the chapter. Contemporary research on the topic is then described, and findings and key recommendations for policy and practice are presented. Each chapter closes with a narrative summary of the chapter's key findings, the research or data limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the findings, gaps in the knowledge base pertaining to the topic area, and future research needs, where appropriate. Key insights and recommendations drawn from both the 2012 SOMAPI forum and the national inventory of sex offender management professionals are noted throughout each chapter, where appropriate. References are included at the end of each chapter.

It is important to note that each chapter has been prepared by a different author and may reflect their individual writing styles. Further, any opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the SMART Office or U.S. Department of Justice.

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Review Methods

Each chapter is based on a review of the scientific literature that addresses the chapter's topic area. Source materials for the literature review were identified using several methods. Chapter authors—

- Conducted keyword searches of abstract databases such as the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, the Social Science Research Network, Academic Search Complete, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, PsycNET, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online, and Sage Online.
- Performed Internet searches using common search engines.
- Reviewed websites of organizations such as the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Center for Sex Offender Management, Civic Research Institute, and Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
- Reviewed reference pages and bibliographies from both online and print documents for potential source material.
- Contacted experts in the field to obtain guidance and insight regarding the acquisition, relevance, and interpretation of source material.⁴

This process produced a number of published and unpublished documents deemed potentially relevant for this report. Documents written from 1990 to the present that could be obtained with a reasonable investment of resources were collected and reviewed with a focus on study characteristics and findings. Because literature reviews on selected sex offender management topics have been undertaken in the past, this report focuses primarily on studies conducted within the past 15 years. The key criteria for discussing a particular study in this review were the saliency of the research findings, the recency of the research findings, and the study's methodological characteristics. With regard to the latter, emphasis was placed on individual studies that employed scientifically rigorous methods and on synthesis studies (e.g., systematic reviews, meta-analyses) that examine the results of many individual studies.

Issues To Consider

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Although there is growing interest in crime control strategies that are based on scientific evidence, it is not uncommon for studies of the same phenomena to produce ambiguous or even conflicting results. In addition, there are many examples of empirical evidence misleading crime control policy or practice because shortcomings in the quality of the research or limitations concerning the trustworthiness of findings were overlooked (see, e.g., Sherman, 2003; McCord, 2003; Boruch, 2007). Hence, both the quality and consistency of the evidence must be considered when interpreting the research findings presented in this report, and conclusions and their implications for policy and practice must be appropriately drawn—and often tempered—based on the trustworthiness of the evidence. While the specific methodological and data quality issues that need to be considered vary by topic, the limitations of official statistics on sexual offending tend to be relevant in every chapter of the report.

The terms "evaluation" and "evaluator" are used throughout the report. In the chapters on risk assessment, these terms refer to the risk assessment process and the clinician or practitioner performing the risk assessment, respectively. In all other chapters, these terms refer to evaluation research (typically focused on a program or other intervention) and the researchers conducting an evaluation study, respectively.

In conclusion, this report is designed to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for the sex offender population. Although the report was developed primarily to provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization, it also identifies knowledge gaps and unresolved controversies that emerge from the extant research and that might serve as a catalyst for future empirical study.

It is hoped that the culmination of the SOMAPI project will help guide OJP's and the SMART Office's sex offender management research, policy, and grant-making efforts in the future and provide direction to the field on how best to protect the public from sexual violence. To learn more about the SMART Office, visit www.smart.gov. For more information about OJP's grant-making efforts, visit www.ojp.gov/funding/solicitations.htm.

Notes

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¹ The national summit, "Promoting Public Safety Through the Effective Management of Sex Offenders in the Community," was held November 24–26, 1996, in the District of Columbia.

² See the appendix for a list of the forum participants.

³ Section 2 also includes an overview chapter.

⁴ The "Etiology of Sexual Offending" chapter in section 1 draws heavily on two published volumes of relevant literature: *Theories of Sexual Offending* by Tony Ward, Devon L.L. Polaschek, and Anthony R. Beeck; and *Sex Offending: Causal Theories to Inform Research, Prevention, and Treatment* by Jill D. Stinson, Bruce D. Sales, and Judith V. Becker.

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Appendix: Participant List for the 2012 SOMAPI Forum

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