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**Sex Offender
Recidivism:
A Simple Question
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This document is available in French. Ce rapport est disponible en français sous le titre :
La récidive sexuelle : d'une simplicité trompeuse.

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Results

Sexual recidivism was measured using the original definitions from the original research reports: 5 data sets used convictions, 4 data sets used new charges (or a new conviction), and one sample used convictions, charges, and additional police information (Manitoba). The five and 10 year recidivism estimates were 17% and 21% for the studies that used only convictions as their recidivism criteria, and 12% and 19% for the studies that used charges and convictions as their recidivism criteria. Given the similarity in the recidivism rates based on convictions alone and charges and convictions, the data was combined to provide overall estimates of sexual recidivism rates. The rates estimated using the combined sample would be closer to the reconviction rate than the re-arrest rate because it appeared that the sources used for the recidivism data contained relatively few charges that did not ultimately result in conviction.

Sexual recidivism rates

Table 2 summarises the recidivism estimates for three distinct time periods, five years, ten years, and fifteen years, for each of the subgroups examined. The overall recidivism rates (14% after 5 years, 20% after 10 years and 24% after 15 years) were similar for rapists (14%, 21% and 24%) and the combined group of child molesters (13%, 18%, and 23%). There were, however, significant differences between the child molesters, with the highest rates observed among the extrafamilial boy-victim child molesters (35% after 15 years) and the lowest observed rates for the incest offenders (13% after 15 years).

Offenders with a prior sexual offence conviction had recidivism rates about double the rate observed for first-time sexual offenders (19% versus 37% after 15 years). Age also had a substantial association with recidivism, with offenders older than age 50 at release reoffending at half the rate of the younger (less than 50) offenders (12% versus 26%, respectively, after 15 years). As expected, those who have remained offence free in the community were at reduced risk for subsequent sexual recidivism. Whereas the average 10 year recidivism rate from time of release was 20%, the 10 year recidivism declined to 12% after five years offence-free and to 9% after 10 years offence-free. The five year recidivism rate for those who had been offence-free for 15 years was 4%. Offence-free was defined as no new sexual or violent non-sexual offence, and no non-violent offences serious enough that they are incarcerated at the end of the follow-up period.

Survival curves

The numbers in Table 2 were drawn from the survival analyses presented in Figures 1 through 6 (see Appendix I). Readers interested in further details of the recidivism rates can use these figures to estimate recidivism rates for different time periods (e.g., 3 years). Each offender is represented on the graph in the top left-hand corner at the time of release (time of sentencing for the community samples). Upon release, none have yet recidivated in the community – hence, 100% have not recidivated at time “0”. As time passes (shown on the horizontal axis of the graph) some offenders recidivate and the survival curve descends. In order to know the percentage of offenders who have remained offence-free in the community for 10 years, follow a vertical line from the 10 year mark (on the axis labelled “Time in years”) up to the survival curve. Next, go perpendicular from that point on the survival curve to the vertical axis (labelled “percentage of offenders that have not sexually recidivated”). To determine the percentage of offenders that have recidivated, simply subtract the percentage of offenders still in the community from 100.

One factor that should be noted from the graphs is that without exception, the longer offenders remain offence-free in the community the less likely they are to sexually recidivate. The flattening, or plateauing, of the curves over time shows this fact. The steepest part of the curve (the highest risk period) is in the first few years after release.

Table 2

Sexual Recidivism (%) across Time and Samples.

Sub-Group		5 Years	10 Years	15 Years	Shown in Figure #
All sexual offenders		14	20	24	1
Rapists		14	21	24	2
Extended Incest Child Molesters		6	9	13	3
“Girl Victim” Child Molesters		9	13	16	3
“Boy Victim” Child Molesters		23	28	35	3
Offenders without a previous sexual conviction versus those with a previous sexual conviction	Without	10	15	19	4
	With	25	32	37	4
Offenders over age 50 at release versus offenders less than age 50 at release	Over 50	7	11	12	5
	Less than 50	15	21	26	5
Sex Offenders - offence free in the community for Five, Ten, and Fifteen years	5 years	7	12	15	6
	10 years	5	9	‡	6
	15 years	4	‡	‡	6

‡ = Insufficient data to compute reliable estimates

Error of estimation

The data presented in all the graphs and in Table 2 are estimates, and some error is inherent in the estimation process. If the study was repeated with different samples, the numbers would not be exactly the same. One way to appreciate the stability of estimates is to calculate 95% confidence intervals based on the standard error of estimate from survival analysis (see Appendix II). Survival analysis computes standard error of estimate based on the number of recidivists and non-recidivists available at each previous time interval. The 95% confidence intervals indicate the range in which the results are likely to be found, 19 times out of 20, if the study were repeated 20 times.

For example, looking at Appendix II, the five year estimate for the overall sample (14.0%) was based on an initial sample of 4,724 of which 2,492 were followed for at least 5 years. The 95% confidence interval was 12.88% to 15.12%, plus or minus 1.12% from the estimate of 14.0%. With large sample sizes, the confidence intervals are narrow, indicating that subsequent research is likely to find very similar results. Readers should note, however, that confidence intervals expanded with extended follow-up times and when subgroups of offenders were examined. For example, the 15 year estimate for boy-victim child molesters (35.4%), was based upon only 95 observations and had a confidence interval from 29.3% to 40.7% ($\pm 5.7\%$). Most of the confidence intervals were less than 5%.

Interpretation of recidivism estimates

The recidivism estimates may be applied to the general case or to the individual offender. For example, if you were faced with a group of 100 newly released rapists and you wanted to follow these offenders in the community over time (Looking at Table 2 – Second sub-group – “Rapists”) you would expect fourteen (14) of these 100 rapists to reoffend within the first 5 years. In the following 5 years, follow-up years 6 through 10, you would expect a further 7 rapists to reoffend for a total of 21 offenders failing after 10 years. In the following 5 years, follow-up years 10 through 15, you would expect a further 3 rapists to recidivate for a 15-year estimated total of 24 out of 100, or 24% of the sample. It is interesting to note that in each successive 5-year period that the recidivism rate basically halves, from 14% in the first 5 years post-release, to 7% in the second 5-year period, to 3% in the third 5-year period.

You may also estimate the recidivism probabilities of one offender over time. If you have one “typical” rapist, the chance that he will recidivate by the end of the first 5 years would be estimated at 14%, by the end of 10 years at 21%, and by the end of 15 years at 24%. The probability of recidivism for an individual offender will be the same as the observed recidivism rate for the group to which he most closely belongs. The individual’s recidivism risk will differ from his group’s recidivism rate to the extent that the offender differs from “typical” members of the group (e.g., has committed more or fewer offences than average for that group). It is important to remember that the confidence intervals for the recidivism estimates only apply to the group estimates and not to the individual estimates. In statistical language, the expected mean value for the individual is the same as the group mean, but the variance of the mean is much greater for the individual estimate than for the group estimate.