Sexual offenders — measuring reconviction, reoffending and recidivism

Louise Falshaw, Caroline Friendship and Andrew Bates

The relationship between sexual reconviction and the actual level of offence-related sexual behaviour was assessed using a sample of sexual offenders in England and Wales. Official reconviction rates (i.e., Government crime statistics) were calculated using data from the Offenders Index (OI) and the Police National Computer (PNC). These were compared to unofficial rates of offence-related sexual behaviour for the same period (i.e. data collected for research purposes). The relationship between the different outcomes was investigated.

Key points

- Unofficial sources of data can be used in conjunction with official rates of sexual reconviction to aid the evaluation of sex offender treatment. Evidence which indicates a lapse into previous offence-related sexual behaviour (recidivism) provides a better indication of the success/failure of sexual offenders following treatment, in terms of their future sexual offending, than using reconviction alone.

- The relationship between the official sexual reconviction rate and the unofficial sexual recidivism rate can be calculated. In this study, the recidivism rate was 5.3 times the OI reconviction rate. A multiplication factor such as this can be used to estimate the level of recidivism from the official reconviction rate. Levels of recidivism provide a more sensitive outcome measure in treatment evaluation research.

- This study demonstrates that when a broader outcome is measured, a higher level of offence-related sexual behaviour by sexual offenders is revealed than is reflected by reconviction rates.

- These results suggest that a broader outcome should be measured in future treatment evaluation research for sexual offenders.

Sex offender treatment programmes are designed to reduce sexual reoffending. Reoffending information is relatively inaccessible to researchers, whereas reconviction data is systematically recorded. Reconviction is therefore used as a proxy for reoffending. As a result, sexual reconviction is currently the most commonly used outcome measure in sex offender treatment evaluation research. The rate of sexual reconviction for sexual offenders, however, is known to be low (Grubin, 1998).
In England and Wales, this rate has declined even further in recent years against an increase in the number of reported sexual offences (Friendship and Thornton, 2001). This presents a problem for treatment programme evaluators. Treatment is expected to reduce reconviction. When the rate of reconviction is low to begin with, any reduction would be so small it would be impossible, statistically, to attribute it to the effectiveness of treatment rather than chance factors.

There are a number of possible solutions to this problem. The reconviction rate is only as good as the source from which it is calculated. Friendship, Thornton, Erikson and Beech (2001) highlighted differences in the information recorded by the two main sources of criminal history data in England and Wales – the OI and the PNC. The authors suggest combining the two data sources in order to obtain a better indication of the level of reconviction. However, this method is unlikely to substantially raise the low rate of sexual reconviction.

Another way might be to extend the follow-up period. Currently, follow-up studies of offenders generally cover the first two years after discharge – this could be extended to five or ten years. However, this would lack the required immediacy for outcome results.

Sexual reconvictions could be supplemented by violent reconvictions. Research has shown that some sexual offences can result in a non-sexual conviction (e.g. Marshall, 1994). Other more sensitive outcome measures might include time to first sexual reconviction, the seriousness of first reconviction or the number of reconvictions during the follow-up period. However, none of these measures provide a better indication of offence-related sexual behaviour displayed by known sexual offenders.

An alternative method would be to access unofficial sources of data (e.g. Marques, Day, Nelson and West, 1994; Marshall and Barbaree, 1988). Unofficial sources could provide evidence of any offence-related sexual behaviour which can then be used to supplement reconviction data.

The current study

The purpose of the current study was to assess more sensitive outcomes for sexual offenders by accessing an unofficial source of data. The source of this data was the Thames Valley Project (TVP), a community-based assessment and treatment provision for adult, male sexual offenders (see Beckett, 1998). TVP is multi-agency and so is able to collect post-treatment information from various sources on the progress of its participants. The rates of sexual reconviction, sexual reoffending and sexual recidivism were calculated for a sample of sex offender participants from this data source.

Official rates of sexual reconviction were also calculated from the Offenders Index and the Police National Computer. The differences between the official and unofficial rates were then assessed.

Table 1 gives the definitions for the three terms employed in this study. Each definition in the table encompasses the one below it. Thus, if an offender has been reconvicted for a sexual offence he has reoffended and has been a recidivist. Sexual recidivism is the most inclusive definition as it refers to lapsing into previous offence-related sexual behaviour.

The sample

The sample consisted of 173 sexual offenders who had participated in the TVP community-based treatment programme between July 1995 and May 1999. Follow-up information was collected for each offender from their programme files which contained multi-agency information, from the date they completed treatment to May 2001. This meant the sexual offenders in this sample were at risk of reoffending for varying periods of time, ranging from two years to five years eleven months. The mean length of time at risk was three years eleven months. See Table 2 for the distribution of at risk periods in the sample.

Table 2 The distribution of the time at risk for the TVP sample (n=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time at Risk</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>no.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 to 3 years</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 4 years</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 5 years</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 6 years</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any offence-related sexual behaviour recorded during the follow-up period was categorised as sexual reconviction, sexual reoffending or sexual recidivism using the definitions in Table 1. The number of those who had first been reconvicted of a sexual offence, had sexually reoffended or who had lapsed into any other offence-related sexual behaviour (i.e., recidivism) during their at risk period was assessed and these rates compared to the official reconviction rates calculated from the OI and PNC.

Evidence of offence-related sexual behaviour

All percentages were calculated as a proportion of the total sample size (n = 173) so that comparison could be made between the different methods of measurement.
Offenders Index

Of the 173 offenders, the OI identified five (3%) who had been reconvicted of a sexual offence during their follow-up period. Reconviction information was unavailable for 71 (41%) of the original 173 offenders due to the delay in data-entry on the OI and the inability to trace a proportion of these offenders.

Police National Computer

The PNC identified 15 offenders (9%) who had received a sexual reconviction during the follow-up period. The PNC was unable to trace 33 (19%) of the original 173 offenders.

Francis, Crosland and Harman (2002), in their study of the OI and PNC, found that 92% of a sample of 18,000 individuals were identified by both data sources. In this study there was only a 63% match between the data sets. However, in the Francis et al. study the majority of the sample was identified from one data set (the OI) and then matched to the other (the PNC). This methodology partially explains the difference between the percentage match in this and the Francis et al. study.

Thames Valley Project

Of the original 173 offenders, TVP identified ten offenders (6%) who had been reconvicted of a sexual offence, 12 offenders (7%) who had sexually reoffended and 28 recidivists (16%).

Figure 1 displays the results attained using the different methods of measurement.

Combining the results from the different methods of data collection provided the most complete outcome information. The individual and combined results are shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OI (individual)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNC (individual)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVP reconviction (individual)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVP reoffending (individual)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVP recidivism (individual)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI and PNC (combined)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI, PNC and TVP reconviction (combined)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI, PNC, TVP reconviction and TVP reoffending (combined)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI, PNC, TVP reconviction, TVP reoffending and TVP recidivism (combined)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparative accuracy of identification

Each data source was found to have evidence of offence-related sexual behaviour for offenders who were not identified by any other method of measurement:

- the OI recorded one offender as having received a sexual reconviction who was not identified by the PNC or TVP
- the PNC identified six offenders as having been convicted of a sexual offence who were not recognised by the OI and TVP
- TVP had evidence of a sexual reconviction for two offenders not identified by the PNC or OI, sexual reoffending for four offenders not recorded by either of the two other sources and sexual recidivism for 20 offenders not recognised by either official data source. It should be noted that some of the reoffenders and recidivists identified by TVP may later have been reconvicted of a sexual offence. Only the first offence-related sexual behaviour was recorded for this sample.

Associations between different methods of measurement

The sexual recidivism rate was 5.3 times greater than the reconviction rate calculated from the OI.

The sexual recidivism rate was 1.8 times greater than the reconviction rate calculated from the PNC.

Collecting evidence of any offence-related sexual behaviour substantially improves on the rate of reconviction obtained from either official source of data. However, combining the results from all methods of
measurement provides the best indication of the extent to which these sexual offenders are lapsing into previous offence-related sexual behaviour.

**Implications of the current study**

- Reconviction rates calculated from the OI are currently the most common outcome measure used by treatment evaluators in England and Wales. This study, however, provides evidence that the OI may not be the most complete source of outcome information required to comprehensively evaluate treatment intervention with offenders.

- The PNC identified a greater number of offenders who had received a sexual reconviction compared to the OI. PNC data, though, is only available to restricted Home Office personnel, whereas the OI is accessible to independent researchers.

- Combining the results from these two official sources of data did not increase the base rate of sexual reconviction above that provided by the PNC alone. This method may therefore not be enough to remedy the problems currently affecting treatment evaluation research.

- Unofficial sources of data can be used in conjunction with official rates of sexual reconviction, particularly those that provide evidence of sexual reoffending.

- Collecting evidence indicative of a lapse into previous offence-related sexual behaviour, i.e. sexual recidivism, provides a better indication of the success/failure of a sexual offender following treatment intervention, in terms of future sexual offending.

- The relationship between the sexual reconviction rate and the sexual recidivism rate can be calculated. In this study the recidivism rate was 5.3 times the OI reconviction rate. A multiplication factor such as this can be used to estimate the level of recidivism from the official reconviction rate, thus providing a more sensitive outcome measure in treatment evaluation research.

- This study should be repeated on a national level to provide a standard multiplication factor for use in evaluation studies.

**Methodological note**

The results from this study are specific to the sample of 173 sexual offenders included in this research. All offenders in this sample had completed a geographically specific community-based treatment programme for sexual offenders. Treatment participants had spent varying periods of time at risk in the community. The sample consisted of different types of sexual offenders of varying ages who are known to be reconvicted at different rates to one another. In order for a standard multiplication factor to be calculated for use in treatment evaluation studies these problems would need to be addressed.

**References**


A fuller report has been accepted for a peer-review publication, for further details contact Louise Falshaw, Room 822, Abell House, John Islip Street, London SW1P 4LH.

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