Findings

A six-year follow-up of men going through probation-based sex offender treatment programmes

Anthony Beech, Matt Erikson, Caroline Friendship and John Ditchfield

This paper analyses the sexual reconvictions of child molesters who had undergone community treatment for their sexual offending behaviour and who had been in the community for at least six years. They had been treated in a representative sample of probation-based sex offender treatment programmes. Extensive data on these men in terms of previous offence histories and psychological profiles had been gathered as part of a previous Home Office study (Beckett et al., 1994).

Key points

- For the men in the six-year follow-up group, the overall sexual reconviction rate was 15% (8 out of 53 men).

- When a risk of reconviction analysis (based on previous sexual offending) was applied to the sample it was found to be highly predictive of reconviction, with higher-risk men being much more likely to be reconvicted of a serious sexual assault than lower-risk men.

- The predictive value of this risk assessment procedure was further increased when psychological profiles of the men prior to treatment were taken into account (their sexual ‘deviancy’ level).

- A clear treatment effect was found, in that only 10% of the men who were classified as ‘benefiting from treatment’ were reconvicted in the six-year follow-up, compared with 23% of men who were classified as ‘not having responded to treatment’.

- A brief dose of treatment was not found to be as effective with men measured at the pre-treatment stage as having a high level of problems compared with those with fewer problems.

The first systematic evaluation of the short-term effectiveness of a representative sample of community treatment programmes for sex offenders in the UK was reported by Beckett et al. (1994). An initial reconviction analysis of this sample was reported by Hedderman and Sugg (1996). This analysis found that six out of the sample of 133 offenders (4.5%) who had undergone community-based treatment had been reconvicted for a sexual offence after two years compared with 17 out of 191 offenders (8.9%) who had been put on probation. Although this study did not take into account the level of risk that the offenders posed, the level of psychological problems the offenders had, or the amount of therapy that had been undertaken, it did provide evidence that those who had undergone cognitive-behavioural therapy were less likely to be reconvicted for a sexual offence than those who had only received probation supervision.
A more detailed analysis was then made of a subsample of 52 men where both pre- and post- treatment information was available (made available by Beckett et al., 1994). Discounting offenders who had left the UK (and therefore would not appear in national reconviction data) or were known to be in prison, it was possible to examine the link between attitudinal change and reconviction for 45 offenders. None of the 24 offenders found to have responded well to treatment were reconvicted within two years (Beckett et al., 1994). This included nine who were classified as highly deviant in pre-treatment tests. Two of the 21 offenders who were not significantly treated were reconvicted for non-sexual, non-violent offences. However, information subsequently became available to the effect that two offenders had committed and been reconvicted of sexual offences during the two-year period (see Table 2). Significantly, neither of these two offenders had responded well to treatment.

The current study
Reconviction rates are traditionally calculated over a two-year period; while this is adequate for most types of offending, the sexual reconviction rates for sex offenders are very small and unreliable. It was therefore decided to re-examine the reconviction record of the same subsample of 52 men, six years after treatment. In addition, the study looks at their reconviction record in relationship to:
• their predicted risk of sexual reconviction level for a sexual offence
• their pre-treatment level of sexual offending problems (as measured by a suite of psychometric measures)
• their treatment success (as measured by change on a number of psychometric measures designed to measure any change in pro-offending attitudes targeted in treatment).

The sample
The sample for the current study comprises the original subsample of 52 men described above (Hedderman and Sugg, 1996). However, it has been enlarged to include six men who were seen before treatment but either dropped out or refused to be seen at the post-treatment stage, i.e., men for whom reconviction information was available but not treatment information. Reconviction information also became available on the two imprisoned offenders in the original sample who had been released after serving short sentences bringing the potential reconviction sample for the present study up to 53 (columns A + C in Table 1 above).

| Table 1  Samples by available information |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Study           | W hole sample | Available information | Study |
| Original study | 52 | 45 | 7 | - |
| Present study   | 58 | 47 | 5 | 6 |

Risk of reconviction level
Risk of sexual reoffending was calculated using an instrument called Static-99 (see below). On the basis of the four Static-99 categories, offenders’ risks of reconviction were rated as: low (0,1 points); low-medium (2,3 points); medium-high (4,5 points); or high (6+ points).

Criminal history data held at New Scotland Yard (microfiche and Police National Computer) was used to calculate actual reconviction rates for the sample. The overall two- and six-year sexual reconviction rates were 4% and 15% respectively (see Table 2). However, two points should be noted:
• although only two offenders were actually reconvicted of sexual offences during the two-year follow-up period, a further two medium-high risk offenders had been charged and subsequently reconvicted
• the two offenders who had spent short periods of time in prison had technically not been ‘at risk’ for the whole of the six year period.

| Table 2  Two- and six-year sexual reconviction rates by risk category |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Predicted risk category | Two-year reconviction rate | Six-year reconviction rate |
| High                      | 20% (1 out of 5 men)       | 40% (2 out of 5 men)       |
| Medium-high               | 8% (1 out of 13 men)       | 31% (4 out of 13 men)       |
| Low-medium                | 0% (0 out of 8 men)        | 0% (0 out of 8 men)        |
| Low                       | 0% (0 out of 27 men)       | 7% (2 out of 27 men)       |
| Total                     | 4% (2 out of 53 men)       | 15% (8 out of 53 men)       |

Static-99
Static-99 covers four broad categories associated with increased likelihood of committing further sexual offences:
• sexual deviance measured by whether the offender has offended against male victims, has never been married, and/or has committed non-contact sex offences
• (increased) range of potential victims measured by whether the offender has offended against unrelated and/or stranger victims
• persistence (sexual offending behaviour) as measured by prior number of sexual offences
• general level of ‘antisociality’ as measured by current or previous non-sexual violence offence(s) and four or more separate previous criminal convictions.

It was developed jointly by Karl Hanson of the Solicitor General’s Department, Canada and David Thornton of HM Prison Service (Hanson R K and Thornton D, 2000).
Although the figures are small, it can be seen from Table 2 that Static-99 was a reasonably good predictor of subsequent reconviction for a sexual offence, with high and medium-high risk men being much more likely to be convicted of a serious sexual offence than low and low-medium risk men at both the two-year and six-year points. The overall sexual reconviction rate for men on all types of community orders sentenced in 1995 over a two-year time frame reported in Kershaw et al. (1999) was 5%. As most of these men can be assumed to be low and low-medium risk, the rates reported here compare quite favourably.

Reconviction in terms of pre-treatment level of sexual offending problems

Work on child abusers by Beech (1998) has shown that ‘high risk’ paedophile offenders can be reliably distinguished from lower risk paedophile offenders (even in the absence of information about previous sexual convictions) by using a number of self-report measures (see Table 3 for a description). Using a group of 140 child abusers, Beech found two main groups:

High deviancy offenders

These offenders perceive children as sexually sophisticated, sexually proactive with adults, unharmed by such contact and able to give consent (such attitudes are termed ‘cognitive distortions’). These offenders have a variety of problems dealing with adults and initiating/maintaining intimate relationships with other adults and actively seek out the company of children to fulfill their emotional and sexual needs. They are generally underassertive, see themselves as having little control over their lives, cannot cope with stressful interpersonal situations, and report low levels of self-esteem.

Offenders with high deviancy profiles were typically sexual recidivists who had either committed extrafamilial offences against boys, or had ‘crossed-over’ in terms of committing assaults on both male and female victims. They had typically committed offences outside, or both inside and outside, the family. In this sample about 25% of the high deviancy group were men who had committed sexual offences against girls within the family – although typically they scored as low or low-medium risk on Static-99. This suggests that the measurement of deviance adds a useful dimension to the measurement of risk.

Low deviancy offenders

These are offenders who do not have the globalised cognitive distortions about children or high levels of social incompetence found in high deviancy offenders. This type of offender is much more likely to have committed offences against girls within the family (incest perpetrators).

Both high and low deviancy abusers have a poor understanding of the impact which their abuse has on their victims.

Table 4 sets out sexual reconviction rates in terms of both risk and deviancy. The sample for this section of the study consists of men in columns A+C in Table 1, i.e., where reconviction information was available.

Table 4 clearly shows that the inclusion of a high and low deviance distinction significantly increased the predictive value of the Static-99 risk assessment. Six out of 13 offenders classified as high and medium-high risk with...
high deviance were reconvicted of a sexual offence compared with only one out of 25 classified as low and low-medium risk with low deviance.

Reconvictions and treatment change

Sexual reconvictions were also examined in terms of the impact treatment had in producing significant decreases in pro-offending attitudes, again using the measures reported in Table 3. The sample for this part of the study consisted of the 47 men (column A of Table 1) where both treatment and reconviction information was available.

In general it was the men who were deemed as ‘not responding to treatment’ who were more likely to be reconvicted. 23% (6 out of 26) were reconvicted for a sexual offence compared with 10% (2 out of 21) of the men ‘deemed as benefiting from treatment’. Also it should be noted that the average length of time until the next conviction was 1.85 years in the ‘unresponsive’ men compared to three years in the two ‘responsive’ men.

It can be seen from Table 5 that treatment appears to work better with low deviancy men (none of the ‘responsive’ men were reconvicted compared with 10% in the ‘unresponsive’ group). Whereas approximately a third of high deviancy men reoffended regardless of how they responded to treatment. This result perhaps suggests that treatment for the high deviancy offenders is less effective than for the low deviancy offenders. However, length of treatment may be relevant - most of the high deviancy men who had been reconvicted had received a fairly brief amount of therapy (approximately 50 hours). Previous research (see Beech et al., 1999) has shown that 50 hours is not enough time to effect any significant change in this type of offender.

Table 5 Six-year follow-up sexual reconviction rates by response to treatment and pre-treatment deviancy level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deviancy Level</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Responsive to Treatment</th>
<th>Unresponsive to Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>7/22</td>
<td>2/6 (33%)</td>
<td>5/16 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1/25</td>
<td>0/15 (0%)</td>
<td>1/10 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample</td>
<td>8/47</td>
<td>2/21 (10%)</td>
<td>6/26 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodological note

Programme selection: the programmes were chosen from among community-based sex-offender programmes surveyed in the early 1990s. While all the selected programmes involved cognitive behavioural therapy, they varied in their length and organisation. For further details, see Hedderman and Sugg, 1996 and Beckett et al., 1994.

Responsiveness to treatment: responsiveness was measured through changes in scores resulting from psychometric tests. For further details, see Beech et al., 1999.

Duration of treatment: programmes lasting more than 160 hours were found to be necessary to produce reasonable treatment changes in high deviancy men. (In future, it should be possible to allocate men to longer or shorter treatment on the basis of risk/deviancy profiles.) For further discussion of length of treatment, see Beech et al., 1999.

References


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