
An Exploration of the Sex Offender Specialization and Violence Nexus

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Abstract

Two commonly researched topics surrounding sexual offending are recidivism and specialization. The widely-accepted belief that sex offenders recidivate at a higher rate than other offenders, in conjunction with the misconception that sex offenders specialize in purely sexual crimes and general criminality, has compelled policymakers to enact conservative legislation. This study assesses the accuracy of these perceptions through an analysis of the non-sex crimes of a sample of 229 currently incarcerated registered sex offenders in Kentucky. The focus of the current study is to explore the heterogeneity among sex offenders as a whole by assessing differences in criminal behavior and offender characteristics of sex offenders who are currently incarcerated for non-sex violent and non-sex nonviolent offenses. Bivariate results suggest that offender age, race, victim age, registration violation, multiple victims, and sex offense severity all significantly differ between sex offenders as conditioned by offense violence. Multivariate results suggest that sex offenders with a child victim and registration violation were less likely to be violent offenders and that offenders with multiple victims were also more likely to be violent.

Key Words: sexual criminal behavior, specialization, high-frequency offenders, sex offender recidivism

INTRODUCTION

The image of sex offenders in the media as incurable human predators influences public perceptions and legislative decision-making. Often, sex offenders are considered especially dangerous and in need of specialized treatment and rehabilitation. Common assumptions hold that sex offenders specialize and are only involved in sexual criminal behavior; however, research has questioned this belief (Simon, 1997; Lussier, 2005; Miethe, Olson, & Mitchell, 2006; Zimring, Piquero, & Jennings, 2007; & Zimring, Jennings, Piquero, Hays, 2009). For example, Miethe et al. (2006) found that sex offenders exhibited the least amount of specialization when compared to all other groups of offenders. Furthermore, studies have also suggested that various types of sex offenders have different degrees of specialization (Simon, 1997; Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, & Ackerley, 2000; Guay, Proulx, Cusson, & Ouimet, 2001; Lussier, 2005). In addition to the belief that sex offenders are specialists, there are also common concerns regarding a presumably high rate of recidivism among sex offenders, although this has also been questioned by researchers (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Sample & Bray, 2003 & 2006). For instance, one review of 42 studies measuring sex offender recidivism concluded that sex offenders have a relatively low rate of recidivism, below 12% (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989). In light of these issues, the focus of the current study is to explore the degree of specialization among violent and nonviolent currently incarcerated sex offenders in Kentucky with special attention to the similarities and differences in offense characteristics.

Sex Offender Recidivism

With large numbers of persons being sexual offense victims, yet sex offenders being relatively rare among arrestees, it is believed that sex offenders are high-frequency offenders, even once identified, arrested, convicted, and sanctioned. This belief has influenced many of the recent restrictions and enhanced sentences legislated for sex offenders. However, research has not supported the assumption regarding the high rates of sex offense recidivism. For example, in two of the most comprehensive studies to date examining sex offender recidivism, Sample and Bray (2003, 2006) examined arrest data from Illinois from 1990 to 1997 to assess the recidivism rates of sex offenders relative to that of other types of offenders. In their first study, Sample and Bray (2003) reported that for 953,000 arrestees with a total of 2,908,000 charges, the property offenders had the highest rate of offense-specific recidivism after five years (38.8%), specifically a rate six times higher than the recidivism rate for sex offenders (6.5%). Additionally, sex offenders also exhibited lower rates of general recidivism (45.1%) compared to most other offender groups. In their second study of this same sample of Illinois offenders, Sample and Bray (2006) focused solely on those arrested for a sex offense. This sample was comprised of 17,000 sex offenders who committed a total of 34,668 sex offenses from 1990-1997. After accounting for incarceration time, their results demonstrated that child molesters had the highest felony offense recidivism rate within 5 years post-arrest (51.9%), followed by rapists (49.1%), whereas those who victimized children and teens showed the lowest general recidivism rates. Regarding offense-specific recidivism within 5 years post-arrest, all of the sex offenders had low rates of recidivism, with rapists having the highest rate (5.8%).

Sex Offender Specialization

Specialization refers to specific patterns of criminal behavior that are persistent throughout the criminal career. Many criminologists believe that certain criminals will continue to engage in similar patterns of criminal behavior across time (Soothill et al., 2000; Hood, Shute, Feilzer, & Wilcox, 2002; Lussier, 2005). In accordance with this perspective, it is assumed that sexual offenders will persist in criminal sexual deviance once such behaviors are initiated. Of practical importance to this assumption is the concept of specialization which drives public policy, legislation, and treatment programs. Most methods of intervention initiated by the criminal justice system are focused on this expected pattern of offending, ignoring the existence of general criminality found among many types of offenders. The issue of whether sex offenders exhibit high levels of specialization has been the focus of several research efforts, with most studies concluding that sex offenders do not have high degrees of specialization.

For example, in one of the more comprehensive studies to date examining sex offender specialization, Miethe et al. (2006) analyzed a sample of 38,000 offenders released from prison in 15 states in 1994. They measured the timing of arrest cycles and the most serious offense within each transition. Their findings suggested that sex offenders had roughly 7 separate arrests, compared with general offenders, who exhibited an average of 10 or more arrests. Furthermore, their results revealed less specialization among sex offenders than other offender types. One important finding they presented concerned the length of the offender's criminal record. Specifically, the longer the criminal record of the sex offender, the more likely they were to be generalists, whereas for property and public order offenders, the likelihood of specialization increased with the length of the criminal career. Overall, Miethe et al. (2006) concluded that sex offenders are neither specialists nor persistent offenders.

Related to the issue of specialization are questions about whether early involvement in sexual offending is likely to be maintained throughout one's criminal career, and more specifically, whether juvenile sex offenders are likely to continue with sex offending as adults. In pursuit of answers to these questions, two recent studies have focused on whether sexual offending as a juvenile is related to adult sexual offending (Zimring et al., 2007; Zimring et al., 2009). The first of these studies examined the offending patterns of 6,000 youth from three birth cohorts (1942, 1949, and 1955) in Racine, Wisconsin. The 1942 youth cohort was followed until the age of 32, age 25 for the 1949 cohort, and age 22 for the 1955 youth cohort. Without detailed offense information, the Racine data was aggregated according to whether the sex offense committed was a felony or misdemeanor. Zimring et al. (2007) sought to identify any indicators of continued involvement in sex offending among those juveniles who had contact with the police for a sexual offense in comparison to those who did not. As hypothesized, very little evidence of specialization or persistence was found among these juvenile-adult offenders. In fact, involvement in juvenile sexual offending did not predict future adult sexual offending. Instead, they found that "the best predictor during a juvenile career of adult sex offending is the frequency of police contacts as a juvenile rather than the presence of a sexual offense during adolescence" (p. 529).

In a more recent study, Zimring et al. (2009) extended their analysis of juvenile sex offenders to include data from the 1958 Second Philadelphia Birth Cohort. This sample contained 13,160 males and 14,000 females, with a special emphasis on the 204 boys and 17 girls with police contacts for sex offenses as a juvenile. Their results suggested that juveniles, as a whole,

are not particularly specialized in their patterns of offending. Likewise, those with a sex offense as a juvenile were no more likely than non-sex juvenile offenders to commit a sex offense as an adult. Similar to their previous findings (Zimring et al., 2007), they found a strong connection between the frequency of juvenile offending and propensity for sexual offending in adulthood.

Current Study

As suggested by the existing literature, sex offenders often engage in a variety of criminal behaviors. However, it is not clear whether sex offenders who also engage in other forms of violent and nonviolent offenses are more similar or different. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the similarities and differences in offense characteristics among violent and nonviolent sex offenders currently incarcerated in Kentucky. By comparing and contrasting sex offenders across this dimension, any existing heterogeneity among sex offenders can be highlighted. Furthermore, this type of analysis can explore the versatility demonstrated by this sample in their general offending, in addition to examining the actual sexual crimes committed by this group of offenders.

METHODS

Data

The data utilized for this study is secondary data retrieved from two sources. The initial source of data collection was the Kentucky Sex Offender Registry, an online database maintained by the Kentucky State Police containing information related to registered sex offenders (<http://kpsor.state.ky.us/>). Relying on this data source, currently incarcerated sex offenders were identified, and several variables were obtained for analysis. The variables of interest that were retrieved through this source include the specific sex offenses for which the offenders were required to register, the age of the victim(s), registration type, and demographic information on each offender. The demographics that were obtained from this source for each offender include their date of birth, race, and sex.

Once the currently incarcerated sex offenders were identified through KSOR, additional information on each offender was obtained through the Kentucky Online Offender Lookup (KOOL) website (<http://corrections.ky.gov/kool.htm>). This website is maintained by the Kentucky Department of Corrections and includes information for currently incarcerated offenders in the state of Kentucky. The information that was obtained from this website includes the correctional institution where the inmate is located, the specific offense(s) for which the individual is currently incarcerated, and the county of the offense(s).

Sample

The total number of currently incarcerated sex offenders found on the Kentucky Sex Offender Registry (KSOR) who are currently incarcerated in Kentucky for a non-sex offense was 229. Excluded from this sample are out-of-state transfer inmates and those whose conviction information is unavailable. The out-of-state transfers were excluded from the sample due to the difficulty in classifying their various offenses in the designed Kentucky classification system. Consistent with prior research and considering that there was only one female on the registry that met the sample selection criteria, our analysis is based on the male sex offenders only.

Variables

Aside from the demographic information, other variables used in the analysis include: victim age, whether an offense included multiple victims, most severe sex offense, most severe sex offense felony level, type (e.g., length) of registration, and whether the offender has a recorded violation of sex offender registration requirements. The dependent variable was whether the non-sex offense(s) for which these sex offenders are currently incarcerated is categorized as either a violent or nonviolent offense.

Independent Variables

The age of victims was dichotomized as under age 18 or age 18 and older. The offenders who victimized children (under 18) represented 57.2% (n=131) of the sample. The remaining 42.8% (n= 98) of offenders victimized adults. In order to examine the extent of the victimization perpetrated by these sex offenders, the variable "multiple victims" was used. This variable included two categories: one victim= 0 and multiple victims=1. Approximately 95% (n=219) of offenders victimized only one individual, the remaining 4.4% (n=10) had multiple victims.

While many of the offenders included in this sample committed multiple sex offenses; the most severe sex offense(s) was utilized for the analysis that follows. This variable was broken down into four categories: rape only (yes/no), sexual abuse/sexual assault only (yes/no), rape and sexual abuse/sexual assault (yes/no), and "other" (yes/no). More than one-third, 39.7% (n=91), of the sample is registered for rape only. Nearly one-half, 45.9% (n=105), of the sample is registered for sexual abuse/sexual assault only. The category of offenders who committed both rape and sexual abuse/sexual assault accounts for 8.4% (n=19) of the sample. The "other" category contains offenders who are registered for none of the aforementioned sex offenses, and committed one or more of the following: sodomy, incest, unlawful transaction with a minor, lewd/lascivious act with child under 16, use of minor in sexual performance, and possession of matter portraying minor in sexual performance. Only 6.1% (n=14) of the sample comprise the "other" category.

Another important variable for consideration when analyzing the currently incarcerated sex offenders is the felony sex offense level. For this variable, the most severe sex offense felony level was utilized to formulate a severity scale. This variable was broken down according to felony level (Felony A, B, C, D, and Misdemeanors). Only 4.8% (n=11) of the sample committed an A felony sex offense. More common were those offenders who committed a B felony sex offense (21.8%, n= 50). The C felony sex offense level category accounts for 17.5% (n= 40) offenders. The majority (53.7%, n=123) of the sample has been convicted of D felony sex offenses, and 2.2% (n=5) of the offenders in the sample have misdemeanor sex offense convictions.

Regarding the type/length of sex offender registration for the sample, 48% (n=110) are required to register for 10 years, 7.4% (n=17) are subject to 20-year registration, and 44.5% (n=102) are lifetime registrants. Finally, a dichotomous variable indicating whether the individual has a recorded sex offender registration violation was included, with 10.9% (n=25) of the offenders having a registration violation.

Dependent Variable

When classifying the non-sex offense(s) committed by these offenders, the most severe non-sex offense for which these offenders are currently incarcerated was categorized into one

of the following: violent, property, drug, violations, and other. The crimes that constitute the “violent” category include: murder, manslaughter, robbery, assault, kidnap, and unlawful imprisonment. For the “property” category, the following offenses are included: arson, burglary, theft over \$100, criminal mischief, forgery, fraud, unlawful use of credit card, receiving stolen property, desecration of a venerated object, and grave violation. Those offenses that fall into the “drug” category include: trafficking of a controlled substance, manufacturing methamphetamine, cultivating marijuana, possession of a controlled substance, possession of drug paraphernalia, driving under the influence, and possession of a forged prescription. The offenses that constitute a “violation” include: failure to register, persistent felony offender, flagrant nonsupport, possession of a handgun by a felon, operating a vehicle without a license, bail jumping, and in-prison offenses such as possession of contraband or possession of a forged instrument. The “other” category includes: escape, wanton endangerment, fleeing and evading, impersonating a peace officer, intimidating a witness, tampering with physical evidence, custodial interference, criminal syndicate, and abandonment of a minor.

The frequency distribution of this variable shows that violent offenses account for 24% ($n=55$) of the sample, property offenses are the most serious non-sex offense for 29.7% ($n=68$) of the sample, drug offenses account for 17% ($n=39$), 22.3% ($n=51$) are incarcerated for a “violation,” and the “other” category represented the remaining 7% ($n=16$) of the sample. This categorical variable was subsequently dichotomized as 1=violent offender and 0=nonviolent offender (e.g., the categories of property, drug, violations, and other were combined) in order to differentiate between those offenders who are currently incarcerated for a violent non-sex offense and those who are currently incarcerated for a nonviolent non-sex offense.

Plan of Analysis

The analysis takes place in several steps. First, descriptive statistics were examined for the sex offenders who are currently incarcerated for a non-sex offense. The analysis identifies demographics for the sample, including the age of the offender and the victim, and the types of sex offense for which they are registered. Second, a series of bivariate *t*-test analyses were performed to identify the similarities and differences between the sex offenders who are incarcerated for violent non-sex offenses and those who are incarcerated for a non-sex, nonviolent offense. Third, a logistic regression model was estimated to explore which variables may predict involvement in non-sex violence among sex offenders.

RESULTS

Sample Descriptives

Table 1 [next page] represents the sample descriptives for each variable included in the analysis. The mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum of each variable is shown in this table. The sex offenders were 40.61 years of age on average ($SD=10.21$), with a range of 21 to 72 years of age. The majority of the offenders were White and chose child/adolescent victims. Slightly more than one out of every ten offenders had committed a registration violation, and less than 5% had more than one victim. Most of the offenders were required to register for 10 years for their sex offense, followed by lifetime registrants and 20 year registrants. Ranging from 1 (misdemeanor) to 5 (felony), the offenders scored an average of 2.73 ($SD=0.98$) on the

sex offense severity scale. Finally, the most prevalent type of sex offense for which these offenders were currently registered was sexual abuse/sexual assault only, followed by rape only, both rape and sexual abuse/sexual assault, and “other” type of sex offense.

TABLE 1. SAMPLE DESCRIPTIVES (N=229)

<i>Variables</i>	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Offender age	40.61	10.20	21	72
Non-white	.36	.48	0	1
Victim age	.57	.50	0	1
Registration violation	.11	.31	0	1
Multiple victims	.04	.20	0	1
Registration type: 10 yrs	.48	.50	0	1
Registration type: 20 yrs	.07	.26	0	1
Registration type: Life	.45	.50	0	1
Sex offense felony level	2.73	.98	0	5
Rape only	.40	.49	0	1
Sexual abuse/assault only	.46	.50	0	1
Both rape and sexual abuse/assault	.08	.28	0	1
Other than rape and sexual abuse/assault	.06	.42	0	1

Mean Difference Tests

A bivariate *t*-test analysis between those sex offenders who were currently incarcerated for a nonviolent non-sex offense and those sex offenders who are currently incarcerated for a violent non-sex offense was conducted. The findings from the mean difference tests are displayed in Table 2 [next page]. As shown, the bivariate *t*-test analysis revealed several significant mean differences. First, in regards to age, offenders who are incarcerated for a violent non-sex offense are approximately 3.5 years older than those incarcerated for a nonviolent non-sex offense. Second, marginally significant race differences ($p=.06$) were revealed, demonstrating that there was a higher prevalence of Non-Whites among the violent offenders. Third, victim ages were significantly different ($p<.001$) suggesting that there was a higher prevalence of child/adolescent victims among the nonviolent offenders. Fourth, there was a higher prevalence of registration violations among nonviolent offenders ($p<.001$). Fifth, there was a marginally significant difference ($p<.10$) for multiple victims, indicating that there was a higher prevalence of having more than one victim among the violent offenders. Finally, the sex offense severity scores were significantly different ($p<.001$) by group, suggesting that the violent offenders on average committed more severe sex offenses than the nonviolent offenders.

TABLE 2. MEAN DIFFERENCE TESTS

Variables	Nonviolent Offenders (n=174)		Violent Offenders (n=55)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Offender age*	39.73	10.36	43.40	9.27
Non-white+	.33	.47	.47	.50
Victim age***	.64	.48	.36	.49
Registration violation***	.14	.35	.02	.13
Multiple victims+	.02	.15	.11	.31
Registration type: 10 yrs	.49	.50	.45	.50
Registration type: 20 yrs	.09	.28	.04	.19
Registration type: Life	.43	.50	.51	.50
Sex offense felony level**	2.61	.97	3.11	.96
Rape only	.37	.48	.49	.50
Sexual abuse/assault only	.48	.50	.38	.49
Both rape and sexual abuse/assault	.09	.28	.07	.26
Other than rape and sexual abuse/assault	.06	.24	.05	.23

+p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Logistic Regression

After the bivariate *t*-test analysis, these same variables were entered into a multivariate logistic regression model so as to examine whether these variables could distinguish violent offenders from nonviolent offenders in a multivariate context. Collinearity is not an issue in this analysis, and the results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. DISTINGUISHING VIOLENT OFFENDERS FROM NONVIOLENT OFFENDERS

Variables	b	se	exp (b)
Offender age	.012	.019	1.012
Sex offense felony level	.325	.211	1.384
Nonwhite	.477	.358	1.611
Victim age	-.792*	.376	.453
Registration violation	-2.103*	1.063	.122
Multiple victims	1.581*	.777	4.859
Registration type: 20 yrs	-.893	.827	.409
Registration type: Life	-.250	.374	.778
Rape only	.497	.747	1.643
Sex abuse/assault only	.182	.799	1.200
Both rape and sex abuse/assault	-.557	.989	.573

Model Diagnostics: $\chi^2= 35.48***$; -2 log likelihood=217.009; Nagelkerke $R^2= .215$

+p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Several variables emerged as significant discriminators for violent offending. For instance, victim age was negatively associated with violent offending ($b = -.792, p < .05$) suggesting that having a child/adolescent victim significantly decreased the likelihood for a sex offender to be currently incarcerated for a violent offense. Having committed a registration violation also significantly decreased the likelihood for an offender to be currently incarcerated for a violent offense ($b = -2.103, p < .05$). Finally, having multiple victims significantly increased the likelihood that an offender would be incarcerated for a violent offense ($b = 1.581, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this study was to explore the degree of specialization among violent and nonviolent currently incarcerated sex offenders in Kentucky with special attention to the similarities and differences in offense characteristics. Most comparisons of subgroups of sex offenders involve victim type or offense type, this study sought to reveal the heterogeneity that exists among sex offenders as a whole, by examining the non-sex offenses for which these sex offenders are currently incarcerated. The results of the bivariate analysis suggested that the following variables differed significantly between those sex offenders with a nonviolent non-sex offense and those with a violent non-sex offense: offender age, race, victim age, registration violation, multiple victims, and sex offense severity. These findings imply that there are differences in the offense and offender characteristics of these two groups of sex offenders. Furthermore, the multivariate analysis revealed that sex offenders with a victim under the age of 18 and with a registration violation are less likely to be violent offenders, and that those sex offenders with multiple victims are more likely to be violent offenders.

Sex offenders have long been a targeted population of offenders. With restrictive legislation and harmful societal stigmas attached, these offenders are seen as predatory and incurable. These offenders violate the vulnerable and are therefore subject to punishment; however, the question remains as to whether they should be punished once their sentence is served. For instance, does community notification and registration curb sex offending? Or does it counteract the treatment they have received and lead to further recidivism? These are questions that demand further research and policy analysis.

Taken together, the present study investigated the criminal behavior of registered sex offenders who are currently incarcerated in the state of Kentucky for a non-sex offense. While the general public and policymakers typically view sex offenders as persistent specialists and recidivists, the literature reviewed in this study and the findings from the present study suggest that sex offenders engage in a variety of criminal behaviors and are a heterogeneous group of offenders. Furthermore, several variables such as victim age, having committed a registration violation, and having more than one victim can differentiate sex offenders currently incarcerated for a violent non-sex offense from those who are currently incarcerated for a nonviolent non-sex offense. Future research should continue to explore the distinguishing features of violent and nonviolent offenders, as well as those that may distinguish sex offenders from non-sex offenders. Having said this, the evidence is mounting against the notion of sex offender specialization and perhaps policies such as registration and community notification need to be re-considered.

The current study is, however, not without its limitations. First, this study is only a snapshot of the sex offenders with certain offense characteristics at one particular period of time

(e.g., cross-sectional data). Additionally, the two sources of data, the KSOR and KOOL websites are official sources of data. Future research should explore whether or not similar findings may be obtained through self-report data sources. Future research could also include a larger sample, specifically across multiple states to see if these findings generalize beyond the State of Kentucky.

Overall, the current study adds to the body of literature showing that sex offenders are not highly specialized in their offending patterns, and that within the population of sex offenders who do commit other types of offenses there is heterogeneity and important patterns that may be important for informing policy, legislation, and predictors of risk and recidivism.

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Richard Tewksbury is Professor in the Department of Justice Administration and Editor of *Justice Quarterly*. His research is primarily in three areas: institutional corrections, sex offender registration and sexuality/alternative-lifestyles. His correctional research interests include correctional programming evaluation, and institutional violence. His work with sex offenders focuses on community responses to sex offenses/offenders, and the consequences of sex offender registration.