

# CSOM FACTS LAWMAKERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ADULT AND JUVENILE SEX OFFENDERS

**There is no “typical” sex offender.** The “sex offender” label implies that all individuals who commit sex offenses are alike, but research shows that they vary in many ways. Variations include basic demographics, the nature and extent of their sexual behavior problems, their development and functioning, intervention needs, and their risk to reoffend. These and other differences underscore the need to resist the tendency to craft “one size fits all” policies and practices.

**The pathways leading to sexual offending are complex.** No single factor explains why individuals engage in sexual abusive behavior. Current theories and research indicate that it is a combination of interacting elements, such as individual characteristics, developmental experiences, situational factors, biological traits and socio-cultural influences.<sup>1</sup> Appreciating these complexities can better guide sex offender management strategies and broader sexual abuse prevention efforts.

**Being sexually abused does not cause sex offending.** A common misperception is that all persons who commit sex offenses have been sexually abused, and that victimization must, therefore, lead to offending. Studies show otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Sexually abusive experiences can affect individuals in various ways, but in and of itself, sexual abuse does not “cause” individuals to become sex offenders. Most people who have been sexually abused do not sexually abuse others.

**Not all sexual abusers of children are pedophiles.** The “pedophile” label is commonly misused to describe anyone who has sexually abused a child. In actuality, it refers to a much narrower group of individuals formally diagnosed with pedophilia, a disorder defined by the extended presence of intense, recurring sexual urges, fantasies or behaviors involving sexual activity with prepubescent children. Many people whose sex crimes involve children do not meet the established criteria for pedophilia. Because deviant arousal and preferences are linked to a higher risk of reoffending, misuse of the term “pedophile” can send an inaccurate message about the risk posed by a given individual.

**Juveniles who commit sexual offenses differ from adult sex offenders.** Research on juvenile sex offenders shows that they have very low recidivism rates, are highly amenable to interventions and are more similar to other justice-involved youth than to adult sex offenders.<sup>3</sup> These findings, coupled with the fact that adolescence is a period of developmental fluidity, suggest that responses to juvenile sex offenders should be rooted in the tenets that drive the juvenile justice system, rather than mirroring strategies for adult sex offenders.

**Sexual recidivism rates for adult and juvenile sex offenders are lower than often believed.** A common myth is that all or most sex offenders will reoffend, but research indicates this is not the case. Recidivism rates vary based on a number of factors, reflecting the diversity of the population. Follow-up studies of adult sex offenders often show that, as a group, less than 25% are rearrested or reconvicted for new sex crimes.<sup>4</sup> Observed sexual recidivism rates for juvenile sex offenders as a group are much lower, often ranging from 5-15%.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that these figures are underestimates, because sex crimes, like other crimes against persons, are underreported.

**A comprehensive collaborative approach is needed to support successful outcomes or victims, offenders and communities.** Working to ensure community safety calls for involvement from a wide range of disciplines and agencies, including, but not limited to law enforcement, victim advocacy, the courts, evaluation and treatment, corrections and community supervision. Ongoing collaboration among these key stakeholders at the policy and practice levels is important for establishing an integrated, seamless and effective sex offender management system.<sup>6</sup>

**The combination of supervision and treatment is more effective than restrictions, surveillance and sanctions alone.** Traditional supervision activities have a key role in supporting public safety efforts. However, studies show that better results are achieved through balanced approaches in which treatment interventions are also implemented.<sup>7</sup> Because specialized sex offender treatment, both for adults and juveniles, lowers recidivism,<sup>8</sup> it is an essential complement to supervision.

**Sex offender management strategies should be tailored to address the specific risk level and intervention needs of a given individual.** Research shows that staff time and agency resources should be prioritized for individuals assessed to be at higher risk for recidivism and to have greater intervention needs, rather than responding to a “one size fits all” manner.<sup>9</sup> Specialized sex offender-specific risk assessment tools for adults and juveniles can assist professionals system wide in making more informed decisions that will maximize resources and outcomes.

**More research on sex offender-specific laws is needed to ensure that these strategies are in the best interest of public safety.** Many states have passed laws to implement mandatory minimum sentences, registration, community notification, residence restrictions, civil commitment and the use of global positioning systems. Research on these laws is limited and the findings are mixed. Some studies reveal the potential for unintended consequences that may increase, rather than decrease, public safety.<sup>10</sup> More research is needed.

“People want a silver bullet that will protect their children. There is no silver bullet. There is no simple cure to the very complex problem of sexual violence.”

Patty Wetterling, 2007

**Primary prevention is an essential part of the solution.** Sex offender management strategies contribute to public safety efforts by addressing people who have already engaged in sexually abusive behavior. These approaches should occur in tandem with primary prevention strategies, which are designed to stop sexual abuse from occurring in the first place. Sexual abuse can and will be prevented when the range of conditions that support and contribute to it are addressed directly – at individual, family, community and broad societal levels.<sup>11</sup>

For more information about the issues covered in this fact sheet, including promising strategies that have been implemented throughout the country, please visit [csom.org](http://csom.org).