

# NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

*An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.*



Volume 6, Issue 4

April 2013

Dear Colleague,

This month we celebrate our 5th year of the NEARI Press Newsletter!

Over these 5 years we have discussed 60 key research articles and reflected upon what this research means both to our individual practices and to our field. We find it incredibly hopeful that so much more research is emerging every day to help keep our work moving towards more and more solid evidence-based practice.

To help increase our knowledge about what we know as well as what we don't know in 2013, this month's issue highlights the work of Michael Caldwell. We asked our friend and colleague, Phil Rich, to review Caldwell's article. Eloquenty, Phil articulates Caldwell's position both on the limits of our current assessment tools to predict risk in adolescents and on the potential impact of an inaccurate assessment on a teenager's life. While assessments are incredibly helpful to the treatment and management process, given these findings, Caldwell and Rich encourage extreme caution, especially when these labels can follow a teen throughout their life.

If you have not had a chance to participate in our FREE webinars, please join us on May 7 with Tom Leversee speaking about: Moving Beyond: Treatment with Adolescents who Sexually Abuse. If you missed one of the previous webinars with Phil Rich, Robin Wilson, David Prescott, Joann Schladale, Rob Longo, Kevin Creeden, Geral Blanchard, Gerry Blasingame, or Pat Wilcox you can listen to the recording on our website at

## Research Cautions Use of Risk Prediction with Teens

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, Joan Tabachnick and Guest Author Phil Rich

### Question

Are adolescent risk assessment processes accurate and reliable enough to determine which adolescents should be identified as sexually violent persons (SVPs), and thus eligible for potential civil commitment?

### The Research

Caldwell writes that 20 states have statutes for the civil commitment of sexually violent persons (SVPs), among which many include the possibility of indeterminate civil commitment for adjudicated juvenile sexual offenders. In his continuing studies involving the capacity of evaluation processes to accurately predict risk for adolescent sexual re-offense, Caldwell studied the records of 198 adolescents who were subject to possible commitment under SVP laws. Each youth was evaluated by a mental health expert and, if provisionally deemed eligible for commitment, a second expert at a later point in the screening process. Among all youth, 27% were deemed eligible for SVP petition and were further evaluated. Further evaluation was considered unnecessary for the other 73%, who were screened out of the SVP process.

During the follow-up period of almost 5 years, almost 58% of all youths were charged with at least one offense for any crime (sexual or non-sexual). However, the any-crime (general) re-offense rate for youths subject to petition was significantly lower than the re-offense rate for those who were not petitioned (35% vs. 66%). Similarly, in terms of sexual re-offense, although the differences were not statistically significant, among petitioned youth the sexual re-offense rate was 11.9% compared to 17.4% among the youth deemed ineligible for SVP screening by expert evaluators.

Caldwell's primary findings are that:

1. Adolescents initially selected for commitment as SVPs were no more likely to sexually recidivate than adolescents who had committed similar offenses (in fact, less so) but were not deemed appropriate for commitment, and
2. Expert evaluation failed to distinguish between the two groups, based on re-offense rates.

He concludes that commonly used risk factors failed to distinguish a distinctly high-risk group, and that no methods currently used to predict adolescent sexual re-offense demonstrate the degree of scientific reliability required for accurate expert judgments or precise

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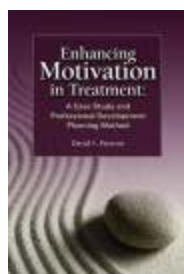
As always, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us at [info@nearipress.org](mailto:info@nearipress.org) or call us at 413-540-0712, x14.

Sincerely,  
Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis



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## FEATURED NEARI RESOURCES



[Enhancing Motivation in Treatment:  
A Case Study and Professional](#)

predictions of risk. Caldwell thus warns that experts involved in assessing the eligibility of juvenile sexual offenders for juvenile civil commitment must proceed with extreme caution.

### Implications for Professionals

Caldwell's results mirror much of the independent research into the capacity of adolescent risk assessment instruments and processes. It highlights the imprecise, and sometimes faulty, nature of the adolescent risk assessment process with respect to its capacity to reliably predict the future behavior of sexually abusive youth, including risk for continued sexually abusive behavior. It is important, therefore, for professionals to be aware, not simply of the presence and intended use of adolescent risk assessment processes, but also of the fallibility, weaknesses, and general lack of empirical validation of these processes, and bear this in mind when conducting or reading risk evaluations. This conclusion is even more critical given the potential consequences of an SVP determination. At this time in the development of adolescent assessment methods, it may be as, or more, important for professionals to consider the outcomes of risk evaluation as pointing to the presence of risk factors which require attention, treatment, and management, rather than the certainty, or even likelihood, of a re-offense.

### Implications for the Field

Caldwell's conclusions have important implications for clinical practice, juvenile (and adult) court proceedings, public policy responses to adolescent sexually abusive behavior, and how to best manage risk and provide services for sexually abusive youth. Of importance, then, is ensuring that public policy, court processes, and assessment practices are informed by, not only research that seeks to establish the empirical validity of adolescent risk assessment processes, but also evidence-based research that highlights the current weaknesses and uncertainties of those processes. Caldwell's study, and his ongoing work in general, contributes to a still developing literature that points to the current lack of empirical validation for assessment processes that are able to make precise predictions. His work demonstrates that our current science is too weak to reliably or consistently determine the future behavior of sexually abusive youth, and too uncertain to serve as the sole foundation upon which to make decisions that may have serious life-changing consequences for them and our society.

### Abstract

This study reviewed the records of 198 juveniles who were committed to secured custody after being adjudicated delinquent for a sexually violent offense that qualified them for possible commitment under a Sexually Violent Person's (SVP) civil commitment law. For an individual to be committed, the statute requires that the individual have a qualifying mental disorder and is "likely," to commit a future act of sexual violence. Each youth was screened by at least two expert examiners in a two-step process. Fifty-four of the youth were found to meet the commitment criteria in an initial examination and were subject to an SVP petition. The remaining 144 were screened out. Subsequent criminal charges were collected over a 4.97-year mean follow-up. The results showed that the prevalence rates for general sexual offending and felony sexual offending did not differ between youth who were screened out and those who were subject to a petition. Among petitioned youth, 11.76% were charged with a new sexual offense including 9.80% who were charged with a felony sexual assault. By comparison, 17.36% of the youth that were screened out were charged with a sexual offense including 13.19% who were charged with a felony sexual assault, a non-significant difference.

## Development Planning Method

by David S. Prescott

This brief text offers the reader an innovative self-examination process designed for building professional skills for engaging and motivating teens. This composite case example provides practical ideas and strategies for engaging a teen client from the very beginning of the process. In addition, the booklet continues with strategies to build upon that initial engagement towards successful outcomes and equally important, sidestepping the inevitable pitfalls when encouraging motivation with teens who have sexually abused.

Paperback, 38 pages  
**ISBN:** 978-1-929657-68-1  
**PRICE:** \$3.75

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## Citation

- Caldwell, M. F. (2013, in press). Accuracy of sexually violent person assessments of juveniles adjudicated for sexual offenses. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. DOI: 10.1177/1079063213480818.

To print a pdf of this article, click [NEARI NEWS](#).

## NEARI Press Webinar

### Moving Beyond: Treatment with Adolescents who Sexually Abuse MAY 7, 2013 2:00pm-3:00pm EST

In the next one-hour NEARI Press Webinar, Tom Leverage has upgraded and revised traditional approaches to enhancing the teaching of relapse prevention to adolescents. He emphasizes clear goals and strong structures to provide a firm grounding for young people dealing with their sexually abusive behaviors.

Space is limited, so please register now to be guaranteed a spot! To register for this webinar, [click here](#). After you register, we will send you information about how to sign on.

One more webinar is scheduled in our series, featuring internationally recognized expert, Su Robinson. If you have liked these webinars, please consider becoming a sponsor for next year and helping us continue to provide these free resources. While we welcome donations of any size, a sponsor costs \$98 for individuals and \$250 for organization sponsors. To say thank you, we will send you two of NEARI Press's popular titles: *Current Applications* and *Current Perspectives*--valued at \$149. Please see our website for more information at [www.nearipress.org](http://www.nearipress.org).

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