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Dear Colleague:

When we highlight adult research, as we did in this issue of the NEARI Press newsletter, we do so only when it informs either clinical practice and/or public policy for youth. In our view, the Hanson, Harris, Helmus, and Thornton meta-analysis provides a compelling new narrative to facilitate our public policy approach for adolescents. When the risk to reoffend for even high-risk offenders decreased substantially over time, the longer that individual lived safely and offense free in the community does raise the question about how to classify adolescents who are clearly evolving and growing and influenced by multiple external factors. We hope this article will help to raise new clinical and policy questions for you and your work.

As always, if you have any other questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely, Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

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## Even High-Risk Adult Offenders Can Become Safer Over Time

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

### Citation

Hanson, R.K., Harris, J.R., Helmus, L., & Thornton, D. (in press). High risk offenders may not be high risk forever. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* .

### The Question

Do high-risk adult sex offenders follow the same pattern of desistance over time that other types of offenders have demonstrated?

### The Research

The public has long believed statements such as “once a sex offender, always a sex offender,” despite decades of study indicating that average rates of sexual re-offense by known sex offenders is 7%-15% after five to six years. That said, even one re-offense is unacceptable, not all sex crimes are reported, and these numbers may be underestimates. However, we do not know either by how much the field is underestimating or the types of offenders who fail to desist. This remains an important area of study. But data aside, the public perception remains and sometimes it is reinforced by earlier research on high-risk adult sex offenders that show recidivism rates ranging between 56% and 70% after 10 years.

Karl Hanson, Andrew Harris, Leslie Helmus, and David Thornton conducted a 20-year meta-

analysis of an aggregated 7,740 adult sex offenders to explore whether the length of time that an individual is offense-free and lives safely in the community is associated with reduced re-offense. This was one objective indicator the researchers were suggesting as a factor in assessing future risk. The authors found that for general and violent offenders, the risk of recidivism was highest in the few years just after release and then decreased the longer the offender lived safely and offense free in the community. This study explores the question about whether this phenomenon is also true for adult sex offenders.

If high-risk adult offenders do not re-offend when given the chance to do so, this suggests they are not as high risk as they were originally considered. Hanson and his colleagues found that, on average, a high-risk adult sex offender's risk to re-offend was cut in half for each five years that they were able to live safely in their community. Given that at least some of the high-risk sex offenders in the community did not re-offend as expected, the authors' suggest there must have been some change in a prosocial direction – a fact that needs further research.

Finally, the authors note that previous studies have documented that the likelihood of a sexual offense committed by an adult male offender with no known sexual violence in his past, is 1%-3%. Therefore, the sexual re-offense risk posed by sex offenders in this meta-analysis is higher than that of violent non-sexual offenders.

\*Note: The authors acknowledge the research that shows how sexual assaults are the least reported crime and acknowledge that known sex offenders in the criminal justice system are very carefully tracked and often re-arrested for non-sexual crimes.

#### **BOTTOM LINE:**

The risk to re-offend is highest during the first few years after release from prison and then decreased substantially the longer that adult lived safely (offense free) in the community.

#### **Implications for Professionals**

The actuarial tools used and the adult perspectives put forth in this research should not be used with or applied to adolescents whose contextualized behavior and developmental realities are in almost all cases profoundly different. Why then is this research important for professionals working with adolescents? For those of us who work with very high-risk adjudicated and violent adolescent offenders, this research suggests that even with these youth, long-term risk projections are not accurate. While we argue consistently for risk management and risk mitigation approaches that are individualized and time limited, if even high-risk adult offenders may desist, how much more careful must the adolescent practitioner be in projecting the likelihood of sexually abusive behaviors in the future for any individual adolescent?

#### **Implications for the Field**

The need to stop the crimes committed by high-risk adult offenders has driven the federal and state public policy agenda about both adult and adolescent sex offenders for the past 20 years. Multi-year registration requirements, community notification, residency restrictions and even youthful offender laws have been built upon the “once an offender always an offender” narrative. While we agree that this narrative may be true for a small percentage of very dangerous violent adults and adolescents, we have sought to differentiate the vast majority of youth from being caught in that narrow web. With this research, 1) the field may need to be even more careful about identifying a small cohort of long-term non-desisting adult sex offenders and, 2) the number of adolescents who fit into that non-desisting high-risk category may be even smaller than previously thought. For example, a 2010 study by Michael Caldwell found that when adolescents are known to re-offend, it is four times more likely to occur in adolescence than in adulthood. From a policy perspective (since most initiatives have been based on a faulty narrative e.g., all sex offenders are at high risk to re-offend), Hanson's work allows us to argue even more strenuously to remove

adolescents from policies targeting adult sex offenders. Now more than ever adult public policy may have virtually no applicability to the largest cohort of youth and those states that continue to apply adult standards may want to reconsider this “broad brush” application.

### **Abstract**

This study examined the extent to which sexual offenders present an enduring risk for sexual recidivism over a 20-year follow-up period. Using an aggregated sample of 7,740 sexual offenders from 21 samples, the yearly recidivism rates were calculated using survival analysis. Overall, the risk of sexual recidivism was highest during the first few years after release, and decreased substantially the longer individuals remained sex offence-free in the community. This pattern was particularly strong for the high-risk sexual offenders (defined by Static-99R scores). Whereas the 5-year sexual recidivism rate for high-risk sex offenders was 22% from the time of release, this rate decreased to 4.2% for the offenders in the same static risk category who remained offence-free in the community for 10 years. The recidivism rates of the low-risk offenders were consistently low (1% to 5%) for all time periods. The results suggest that offense history is a valid, but time-dependent, indicator of the propensity to sexually re-offend. Further research is needed to explain the substantial rate of desistance by high-risk sexual offenders.

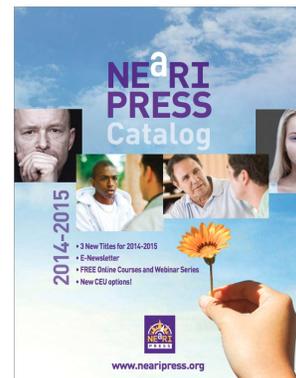
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**Framingham, MA**

**October 17, 2014**

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