

# 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 1, Issue 4

July 2008

*Dear Colleague,*

**We hope that this month's research sparks some interest and even debate for you and your colleagues.**

While reviewing this month's issue, we talked about the unspoken debate and the fundamental difference between retributive vs. restorative justice. We discussed:

- the valid desire to impose a *punishment- only* consequence and
- that this approach rarely has anything to do with prevention of future impact.

Now, we could all debate this from a cultural, humanistic, ethical perspective, but in the context of this research, we see that a punitive approach may come with a heavy price of higher recidivism among youth, and therefore, additional victims.

So, philosophy aside, the research and pragmatics place a heavy moral burden on those who do not look at the

## **Punishment Does Not Prevent Abuse**

**by David S. Prescott, LICSW**

### **Summary**

The public is rightfully horrified to read about sexual crimes committed by young people. The public response has been to demand stiffer sentencing and harsh responses to stop the abusive behavior. However, decades of research suggest that punishment-only approaches have no effect on recidivism. The studies are clear. To reduce their risk to reoffend, young people who have sexually abused need to be held accountable for their crimes AND be given opportunities to change as well as venues where they can demonstrate change.

### **The Issue**

Some professionals believe that punishment is the best response to a youth who has sexually abused (e.g., Juszkievicz, 2006). Given the developmental needs of young people (Ryan & Lane, 1997), punitive approaches do not stop the abuse and are potentially harmful to the long-term needs of our communities.

### **The Research**

Paula Smith, Claire Goggin, and Paul Gendreau (2002) examined 117 studies from 1958 to 2002 involving 442,471 criminal offenders. This study expanded previous analyses by examining the effects of sanctions on over 50,000 juveniles as well as with females and minorities. They studied the impact of various punitive approaches on recidivism. The punitive approaches included:

- Length of incarceration
- Institutional placement
- Receiving an intermediate sanction (such as "scared straight")

research for youth and satisfy the need for "justice" with a retributive approach.

We hope you enjoy the reading and please let us know what you think!

Warmly,  
Steven Bengis and Joan Tabachnick  
[www.neari.com](http://www.neari.com)

## Featured Website

[www.ojdp.ncjrs.gov](http://www.ojdp.ncjrs.gov)

With this issue, we see the importance of understanding the youth who are in the systems and in particular who have committed a sexual offense. The website by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is an important resource for professionals of all backgrounds, especially if you are looking for statistics, research, and trends in the juvenile justice field.

### About the Author: David S. Prescott, LICSW



[David Prescott website](#)

A nationally recognized expert in the field of sexual abuse assessment, treatment, management, and prevention, Mr. Prescott has published numerous articles and authored, edited, and co-edited books on risk assessment, interviewing, and providing residential treatment to youth. He is the President of ATSA and is currently the Treatment Assessment Director at the Sand Ridge Secure Treatment Center in Mauston, WI.

The study found that the use of punitive sanctions did not decrease recidivism under any of these conditions. If anything, some initial findings showed a slight increase in recidivism with an increase in length of incarceration.

The authors concluded that, "Prisons and intermediate sanctions should not be used with the expectation of reducing criminal behavior." **Implications for Professionals**  
The findings are clear: Punishment does not decrease recidivism. Professionals will want to consider this research when making recommendations that could affect sentencing or interventions. Professionals will also want to ensure they use these findings to differentiate between measures that are punitive-only and interventions that enable a youth to develop their own reasons to live a life free of abuse.

#### Implications for the Field

Punishment-only approaches are costly and harmful. Professionals should be cognizant that a punishment-only approach, especially for youth, does not reduce the likelihood of future crime. Further, some aspects of punishment (e.g., longer prison sentences) have been linked to higher recidivism and a less safe community.

Given the reality that many young people who sexually abuse come from backgrounds in which abuse is commonplace (Schwartz, Cavanaugh, Prentky, & Pimental, 2006), interventions must involve adults who will teach and model accountability and offer a positive alternative for living a healthy life.

Finally, professionals should advocate for treatment as a means of preventing further abuse. The stakes are too high to ignore these findings.

A summary of this study appears at: [www.publicsafety.gc.ca](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca)

The complete study is available:  
[publications/corrections/200201\\_Gendreau\\_e.pdf](#)

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

#### References

- Juszkiewicz, J. (2000, December). Youth Crime/Adult Time: Is Justice Served? Document in electronic library of the National Institute of Corrections. Retrieved June 29, 2008 from <http://nicic.org/Library/016611>. Also available at [www.buildingblocksforyouth.org](http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org).
- Letourneau, E.J., & Miner, M.H. (2005). Juvenile sex offenders: A case against the legal and clinical status quo. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 17, 293-312.
- Ryan, G. & Lane, S. (1997). *Juvenile sex offending*. Sand Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schwartz, B. Cavanaugh, D., Prentky, R., & Pimental, A. (2006). Family violence and severe maltreatment in sexually reactive children and adolescents. In R.E. Longo & D.S. Prescott (Eds.), *Current perspectives: Working with sexually aggressive youth and youth with sexual behavior problems*, pp. 443-472. Holyoke, MA: NEARI Press.
- Smith, P., Goggin, C., & Gendreau, P. (2002). The effects of prison sentences and intermediate sanctions on recidivism: General effects and individual differences. (User Report 2002-01). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

Join Our Mailing List!

Please email us at [info@neari.com](mailto:info@neari.com) or call us at 413.540.0712 to let us know if you have a question or a topic you would like us to cover.

If at any time you no longer want the e-newsletter, just let us know and we will remove your name from our list. We value your trust. We will not sell or give your contact information to any other organization.