

Mini Review

Preliminary Results of an Intervention with Portuguese Sex Offenders: Comparing Rapists, Child Molesters and Child Pornographers

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Abstract

Introduction: Sex offenders are one of the most feared groups of offenders and several attempts to create effective programs to prevent re-offending are known. In Portugal, there is a lack of programs to deal with sex offenders sentenced to community measures.

Aim: To present some preliminary results of an intervention program concerning sex offenders (rapists, child molesters and child pornographers) serving sentences in the community.

Methods: 35 offenders were tracked via an integrated system of the Directorate of Social Reinsertion and Prison Services to assess if and when they reentry the judicial system after release, and what type of charge they face

Main Outcome Measures: Crime committed, length of time spent since release of prison without committing crimes

Results: Five individuals (14%) recidivate (2 child molesters and 3 rapists). Child molesters that recidivate were in one case arrested for domestic violence and in the other case it was a child abuse whose crime occurred previously to our intervention and was lately reported. The recidivate rapists committed crimes against property in two cases while the remaining offender committed another rape.

Conclusion: Individuals who serve prison sentences may be more prone to recidivate because they have already a higher risk of reoffending or because they lack specific intervention while in prison. Individuals with a general pattern of offending are also more prone to reoffend. Interruption of the intervention is clearly a major issue regarding future reoffending thus remembering the importance of treatment integrity.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual offenders (SOs) represent one of the groups of offenders that most fear inspire in people, either by taking into account the various negative consequences that originate in victims and their families or through the feeling of insecurity that they instill in the community. As a result, they are the group with the greatest media repercussion at national and international level, promoting several changes in the current laws, almost everywhere [1].

In any case, several meta-analyses have highlighted the effectiveness of intervention programs with this group of offenders [2,3], revealing an average positive effect of 14 points on groups control, which become more expressive when the interventions have a cognitive-behavioral basis. In turn, Hanson and colleagues [4] carried out a meta-analysis of 23 studies of recidivism results that respected the basic criteria for the quality

of the studies. The authors showed that the rates of sexual and general recidivism of the SOs that were treated were lower than the rates observed in the comparison groups (10.9% [n = 3,121] versus 19.2% [n = 3,625] for sexual recidivism; 31.8% [n = 1,979] versus 48, 3% [n = 2,822] for any recurrence). Additionally, programs that adhered to the R-N-R principles [5] showed the greatest reductions in sexual and general recidivism. Previously, a review on 10 follow-up studies of adult male SOs (combined sample of 4,724) reported several conclusions: most SOs do not re-offend sexually, first-time SOs are significantly less likely to sexually re-offend than those with previous sexual convictions, offenders over the age of 50 are less likely to re-offend than younger offenders and the longer offenders remained offence-free in the community the less likely they are to re-offend sexually [6]. Furthermore, different kinds of SOs (rapists, incest offenders, child molesters) exhibit significantly different rates of recidivism [6].

Another aspect that must be addressed concerns the criminal specialization of sexual offenders. In the meta-analysis of Seto and Lalumiere [7], with adolescents who had committed sexual crimes, the authors found that other antisocial tendencies were not present, which allows us to affirm that this type of offenders does not present personality disorders associated with the type of crime they committed. Furthermore, when other antisocial trends are present, these factors predict general recidivism, but not sexual recidivism [3]. Additionally, it is also relevant to realize which risk factors distinguish sexual offenders from most criminals, or the extent to which many risk factors are common among them. For example, substance use appears as a relevant risk factor in the meta-analytical study [4] but samples that are more robust are needed to understand its magnitude and importance when analyzing national samples. In fact, and given the relevance that the RNR model represents for intervention with offenders in general, it seems necessary to further deepen the typology of sexual aggressors, associating to the identified risk factors the elements derived from the styles of victims' selection and attacking [8], as well as the motivations that lead to these crimes.

Intervention programs for sex offenders have focused on cognitive distortions, the development of empathy towards victims, the development of social skills, the elimination of deviant sexual interests and the development of security plans to promote relapse prevention [9].

Sexual crimes in Portugal

Data provided by the administration of justice (<https://www.dgpi.mj.pt/>) reported that sexual crimes represent a low figure in the Portuguese crime rates – between 4 to 5 percent of the total crimes against persons – a number that remains stable for the last nine years (2010-2018). In 2018, there was total of 1650 individuals under probation/community measures for sexual crimes, while only 377 individuals were serving prison sentences for rape (157) or child abuse (220). Additionally, as seen from Table 1, in 2016, most of the SOs serve community sentences (prison suspended, parole or provisional suspension of the process), therefore calling attention for the need to develop intervention mainly for individuals in the community.

Earlier information on these issues was presented by Barroso and colleagues [10] thus reinforcing the idea that a growing interest in the study, evaluation and treatment of sex offenders became an important topic of discussion, either for citizens in general, politicians or academics in Portugal. Additionally, in the same paper the authors provide a comprehensive overview of research done in Portugal on the subject of sexual crimes and

more recently refer to the relevance of providing adequate tools for measuring sexual deviance, namely in youths [11]. Profiling has also been a matter of interest for Portuguese researchers in the field of sexual crimes and therefore a study [8] was conducted using a sample of 216 incarcerated sexual offenders that identified and tested hunting behavior patterns to establish which of those were associated with each type of offender. Relationships between modus operandi, geographic decision making, and hunting behavior were also examined. Three types of offender were identified: (a) manipulative; (b) opportunist; and (c) coercive. The manipulative offender is typically a child molester. The coercive offender is typically a rapist. The opportunist offender includes both rapists and child molesters. These findings emphasize the relevance of polymorphous, crossover, or versatile sex offenders and suggest new ways of conceptualizing sex offenders and their study.

These studies although relevant don't deny the absence of a structured and systematic approach to provide psychological intervention for SOs in Portugal considering the amount of condemnations for these crimes, mainly in the community.

Intervention with sex offenders in the community

The current project started in February 2012 with a request from a Probation Service Unit to intervene in a rather problematic sex offender (rapist) who presented violent outbursts and was evaluated as having high risk for reoffending. Only in 2013, data begin to be systematically collected related to sex offenders that were engaged in judicial mandatory treatment, while serving either community sentences or parole after serving time in prison. Treatment is based on cognitive-behavioral approach following the R-N-R model [5]. Intervention encompasses the length of the sentence first part of it focusing on the specific intervention and later monitoring until the sentence ends.

A full package of psychometric instruments is currently used to assess SOs level of general risk of recidivism, aggression, and risk of sexual violence, sexual violence beliefs and a socio-demographic and criminal data questionnaire. Depending on the individual background and file information, measures of psychopathy and mental disturbance were occasionally used. Considering the scope of this article, the results of these instruments are not presented here.

Participants were 35 males that already finished the intervention together with their sentences that runs from minimum of ten months to a maximum of 60 months, which is the limit to be condemned in a community sentence. Sentence length average was 40 months. Age average was 54 years-old

Table 1: Sexual Crimes and convictions in Portugal official records (2016).

Type of Crime	Charged	Condemned	Prison	Community
Rape	151	106	62	44
Child Molesting	366	276	79	197
Sexual Coercion	47	32	9	23
Abuse of a person incapable of resistance	32	22	10	12
Total	596	436	160	276

Source: <https://www.dgpi.mj.pt/>

Table 2: Distribution of recidivists for types of crimes and types of sentences.

	Provisional Suspension	Prison Suspension/ Probation	Parole	TOTAL
Child Molesters (n = 20)	5	12	3	20
Recidivists	0	2	0	2
Rapists (n = 5)	0	0	5	5
Recidivists	0	0	3	3
Pornographers (n = 6)	1	4	1	6
Recidivists	0	0	0	0
Other (n = 4)	2	1	1	4
Recidivists	0	0	0	0
TOTAL (n = 35)	8	17	10	35
Recidivists	0	2	3	5

(SD = 18.38). Crime typology was as follows: 20 child molesters, 6 child pornographers, 5 rapists and 4 individual condemned for other types of sexual crimes, namely sexual misconduct (e.g., indecent exposure and verbal sexual harassment). Eight of them were serving provisional suspension of the process, 17 were on parole/suspended prison and the remaining 10 were on parole after serving time in prison.

Results on recidivism rates

The first offender completed the intervention on December 2013 while the last one did so in August 2019. Data related with offender recidivism was obtained from consulting the Integrated System for Social Reinsertion, a device that allows for identification of all the individuals that reentry in the judicial system, the crime they committed and when it occurred. Due to the number of participants, statistical procedures were not advisable (Table 2).

Nevertheless, according to Table 2, of the 35 offenders that completed the intervention, only five individuals (14,3%: 2 child molesters and 3 rapists) committed new crimes. This percentage is in line with some of the findings reported above [2,3]. Child molesters that recidivate were in one case arrested for domestic violence and in the other case it was a child abuse whose crime occurred previously to our intervention and was lately reported. Therefor these two offenders did not complete the intervention. The recidivate rapists committed crimes against property in two cases while the remaining offender committed another rape. This was a high-risk offender and moved to another jurisdiction therefor leaving treatment in the middle. Attention should be paid to the fact that rapists were solely on parole meaning that have served time in prison and during that time, according to file information they were not engaged in any sex offender program. On the other side no recidivism behavior was detected on pornographers which may be linked to their low scores on the sex violence risk assessment that is reported in some literature [12,13] and only two of the child molesters did recidivate but in circumstances that cannot be linked to intervention failure. Additionally the fact that sex offender recidivism occurred in cases that did not complete the intervention is relevant.

CONCLUSION

Although sexual recidivism rates are lower than the public generally believes [6,14], the profound negative consequences of these offenses [15,16] motivate exceptional and unique

efforts to manage sex offenders. Actually, these preliminary results seem to point to the existence of recidivism rates in accordance with different patterns of offending and sentencing. Individuals who serve prison sentences either are more prone to recidivate because they have already a higher risk of reoffending or because they did not have any specific intervention related with sexual crimes or both. However, except for one subject that was probably a serial rapist, all other former inmates did recidivate but on other crimes, suggesting that they have a more general pattern of offending rather a specialized focus on sexual crimes. Interruption of the intervention is clearly a major issue regarding future reoffending thus remembering the importance of treatment integrity. In any case, these preliminary results are consistent with the need to support sex offender treatment, namely, to protect future victims.

To be effective, such efforts generally require an understanding of what motivates sexual offending (denial, cognitive distortions, moral disengagement, etc.), how to identify offenders likely to reoffend (risk assessment), and how to intervene to reduce reoffending (prevention and treatment) [17]. Our results, based in a small and not representative sample, should be considered with caution and we can only be sure of the strength of our intervention after performing survival curbs on a larger sample. Indeed, at this point these results are nothing more than a glimpse of hope concerning treatment of Portuguese sex offenders.

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