

Information About Sexual Offenders

This handout offers information on sexual offenders. It is written to help you understand the common behaviors of sexual offenders and conditions that contribute to their acts. The Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress (HCSATS) is here to help you.

Observations About Sexual Offenders

There is no “typical” sexual offender. Rapists and child molesters come from all backgrounds and can often seem like ordinary law abiding people. Although most offenders are male, females can also commit sexual offenses.

Sexual offenders can range in age, from young teenagers to senior citizens. More than half of adult sexual offenders begin offending in their teens. Although young children can be sexually aggressive or inappropriate, they are not offenders and are not prosecuted. Instead they are treated as children with serious behavior problems who should have treatment and be supervised.

This handout tries to answer these commonly asked questions:

- What are the common characteristics of sexual offenders?
- What are the punishments for sexual crimes and what treatment available for sexual offenders?

What can be done to help prevent someone from becoming a sexual offender?

Common Behaviors and Characteristics of Sexual Offenders

Most sexual offenders think about their crimes ahead of time. Sexual assault is rarely an impulsive act although sometimes sex offenders take advantage of opportunity to offend. Offenders most often know their victims and use these relationships to set up situations in which a chosen victim can be sexually assaulted. Sexual assaults can involve physical violence, threats, or overpowering. In other cases victims go along with the assaults because they are afraid to resist or to try to get away.

Planning and manipulating relationships over time to commit sexual offenses is called ***grooming***. In these situations victims may come to believe that they are responsible for what happened even though this is never true. After the assaults, offenders often threaten, pressure or use guilt to keep victims from telling anyone.

How Offenders Justify Their Behavior

Offenders may justify their behavior in several ways:

Denial is used by offenders to avoid facing the consequences of their actions. Denial means that offenders refuse to admit to others or sometimes even to themselves that they have committed sexual assaults. They may say, “It’s a lie. I never did it,” or “That wasn’t really rape, she agreed to it.”

Rationalizing involves blaming the victim, other people or circumstances. Typical thoughts are, “It wasn’t my fault, she led me on”, “he didn’t fight back” or “I didn’t know what I was doing, I had too much alcohol...” These are ways of placing responsibility on someone or something else.

Minimizing is used by offenders to deny the seriousness of the acts or the harm done to the victims. “It wasn’t that bad – he liked it,” or “I didn’t really hurt her.” By minimizing their actions, offenders try to make it seem as though what they did was not such a big deal.

Common Conditions Which Contribute to Sexual Offending

Several conditions can contribute to the likelihood of sexual offending. Typically a case involves a combination of factors and circumstances. It is important to understand that sex offenders always make a choice when they commit sexual offenses no matter what the reasons are that go into why they did it. They decide to act even though they know it is wrong. Nothing a victim does can make a person commit a sexual offense.

Feeling Motivated –Offenders often have abnormal or unusual sexual interests. They may be sexually attracted to children or young teenagers. It does not bother them to have sex with someone who doesn’t want to.

Antisocial Attitudes – Some offenders believe it is acceptable to take advantage of other people or break the law. They may not understand or care about the feelings of others and put what they want first.

Background of Offender – Some people who have been abused, mistreated or neglected develop negative feelings and beliefs about themselves and others. They may try to gain control over their lives or relieve emotional pain through abusive sexual behavior towards others.

Lack of External Controls –Offenders create situations that give them the opportunity to offend and where there is little chance of being caught. In the case of child molesters, they may put themselves in situations where they are alone with and have control over children. Rapists will often get victims away from friends or in isolated situations.

Vulnerable Victims – Although the responsibility for sexual offending is always with offenders, rapists and child molesters may look for vulnerable people to victimize. Victims can be vulnerable because they are young, have a disability or are impaired in some way. People can be victimized because they are alone in an isolated area, asleep, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from emotional problems. Offenders want victims who cannot protect themselves.

Stopping Sexual Offenders From Offending

Some sex offenders will stop offending on their own, but making a report to the authorities is the best way to lower the chances for repeat offending. When sex offenders are caught and investigated or prosecuted they learn that there are consequences for offending. If they are convicted of a crime, then the courts can impose punishment, require them to get treatment or put restrictions on what they do.

Incarceration: Courts can sentence convicted sex offenders to prison. This serves two purposes. First, it is punishment for breaking the law and second, the community is protected while offenders serve their term in jail or prison. Convicted sex offenders who commit violent offenses, have been convicted before or have many victims will almost always be imprisoned. Sometimes offenders can have treatment while they are in prison. They will be supervised once they get out and have certain restrictions or requirements that they must follow.

Community Sentencing Alternatives: Offenders who have committed less violent offenses and who show that they want to change their behavior, may be given the opportunity to avoid going to prison and stay in the community and get treatment under the supervision of the court. Offenders who get this option may have to go to jail for a few months as well for punishment. If these offenders do not complete treatment or break the rules, they will have to serve a prison term. Victims are allowed to have a say about whether the court should allow this alternative sentence.

Convicted offenders are often court-ordered to pay for their victims' counseling and medical costs, and legal fees. Those who get to remain in the community under supervision must pay for their own treatment.

Sex Offender Treatment

Research has shown that specialized sex offender treatment can lower the chances of repeat offending for some sex offenders. This type of treatment specifically focuses on changing abnormal sexual interests, correcting attitudes and beliefs that justify sexual offending, increasing understanding and empathy for victims and teaching skills to prevent re-offending and to help offenders lead normal lives. Only specialists can give this kind of treatment. Sometimes treatment is given in the community and other times it happens in prison.

Prevention

There are ways in which families and society can work to make it less likely that children will grow up to be offenders.

Children who have been physically or sexually abused should have counseling so that they have an opportunity to express their feeling and recover from their experiences.

Families should teach values about sexual behavior that emphasize the importance of consent, respect, and responsibility.

Children should not be exposed to sexually violent magazines, pictures, or movies.

Children need opportunities to express all kinds of feelings in ways that do not hurt others.

When children sexually misbehave, parents should immediately take steps to control the behavior, to get children treatment, and to protect other children.

More than half of adult sex offenders begin offending in adolescence. This does not mean that all teenage sexual misbehavior will lead to adult sexual offending. However, the evidence shows that rape, child molesting, or other sexual offenses committed by teenagers should not be minimized as adolescent sexual experimentation. If these behaviors are not confronted and treated, they may develop into patterns that will be more and more difficult to change.

We hope the information provided in this booklet will be helpful to you. Every situation of sexual offending is unique and you may have questions that were not answered here. We encourage you to discuss your questions with your counselor. We are here to support you. Please let us know of any way we can be of further assistance to you.

Our mission is to prevent and counter the harmful effects of traumatic experiences on victims, families and our community. These experiences include sexual and physical abuse and neglect of children, rape, sexual harassment, violent crime, accidents and disasters. Services reflect the values, beliefs and traditions of our community and are available to people of all ages. We strive to create a society free of interpersonal violence.

Founded in 1973, the Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress is a Washington state accredited Community Sexual Assault Program.