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I26 Sex Offender Reading Levels: Recidivism, Referral, and Age of First Offense

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Learning Overview: The goals of this presentation are: (1) to inform those involved in the assessment of sexual offenders of the considerations of reading levels as they relate to etiology and, in turn, the risk of reoffending, and (2) to provide treatment providers with data on the potential impact of reading ability for treatment planning use.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by improving the ability of evaluators of sexual offending behavior to determine etiology and risk and by helping treatment providers develop treatment plans with a likelihood of successful outcomes.

This presentation focuses on the reading levels of 1,135 adults who committed sex offenses and were being reviewed for potential civil commitment under the South Carolina Sexually Violent Predator (SVP) Act. Previous studies suggest that the majority of inmates in America are functionally illiterate and that the improvement of basic skills would help decrease the rate of recidivism.¹ Other qualitative studies have reported a correlation between recidivism of juvenile delinquents and low academic achievement. These studies also reported a trend of below grade-level reading scores among incarcerated youth.^{2,3} It was hypothesized that juvenile offenders who had been arrested and remanded to juvenile justice facilities would have lower reading levels than juvenile offenders who were not remanded to a juvenile justice facility. This study hypothesized that the reading level would increase as the age of the offender's first sex offense increased (i.e., individuals who had their first sex offense arrest at an older age would have higher reading scores than individuals who were of younger age at first sex offense arrest). It was predicted that the reading levels of offenders would decrease as the number of prior sexual offenses increased. It was also hypothesized that sex offenders who were referred to the next step in the process for civil commitment under the SVP Act would have lower reading scores.

Preliminary data indicated that reading levels ranged from 0 to 15.0 (15th grade) with an average level of 8th grade. Approximately 46% (*n*=520) of the overall sample had a history of juvenile arrests for any offense, with 27.5% (129) of those inmates having been detained in a youth detention facility. In this sample, 31.9% of offenders had been convicted of a previous sex offense. Also, 42.2% (*n*=1,047) of the offenders were referred to move on to the next step of being considered for civil commitment.

Reference(s):

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2. Shippen, M.E., Houchins, D.E., Crites, S.A., Derzis, N.C., and Patterson, D. (2010). An Examination of the Basic Reading Skills of Incarcerated Males. *Adult Learning*, 21(3/4), 4-12.
3. Vacca, J.S. (2008). Crime Can Be Prevented if Schools Teach Juvenile Offenders to Read. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(9), 1055-1062. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.01.013

Sexual Offenders, Literacy, Sexually Violent Predators