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The Community and the “Cure”

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In a recent television interview, a talk-show host asked boxer Mike Tyson why people should take his opinions seriously when he is a “rapist.” This referred to a crime that Tyson committed over two decades ago. Tyson’s response was swift and characteristic of his career; he insulted the interviewer and challenged him to a fight. Although the situation was unfortunately and entirely unnecessary, it demonstrated what research has found: people change, and violence and aggression are more likely to persist than sexual abuse. Mike Tyson may have persisted in many undesirable behaviors, but he has apparently desisted from further sexual abuse. Tyson objected to the label “rapist,” and perhaps we should as well.

In the interest of accurate language, Mike Tyson is a person who has been violent towards others in and out of the boxing ring. Sexual abuse is an area where, as Bill Marshall (personal communication, September 11, 2014) recently observed, our labels stick like glue. It is fascinating that the interviewer used this particular label rather than asking, “Why should people take your opinions seriously when you’ve bitten off parts of your opponents’ ears and assaulted strangers on the side of the highway?” Perhaps part of the answer lays in public ignorance about how sexual re-offense does – and more importantly – does not happen.

Relevant to this is a study (in press) that merits close attention. Karl Hanson, Andrew Harris, Leslie Helmus, and David Thornton studied 7,470 sexual offenders from 21 samples and found that:

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 offence history is a valid, but time dependent, indicator of the propensity to sexually reoffend.



SAJRT Bloggers' Profile
Chief Blogger Kieran McCartan, Ph.D. and Associate Bloggers David S. Prescott, LICSW and Jon Brandt, MSW, LICSW are longtime members of ATSA. We are dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

Certainly, official records of re-offense underestimate the true rate of sexual crimes. However, the overall trends in this study reflect what we already know from numerous other studies around the globe. Most sexual offenders are not known to re-offend, and only a small minority is at truly high risk. This presents many opportunities for reconsidering our current approaches to management, including the use of strategies that reduce risk, protect communities, and help assist those affected by sexual abuse that are more efficient and cost-effective than the many ineffective strategies in place today (e.g., residence restrictions).

These findings should prompt all professionals and the lay public to reflect on their beliefs about people who sexually abuse. Until recently, Colorado statutes stated that, “there is no cure for sex offending,” as though it were a disease instead of a preventable behavior. Likewise, by the time someone reads this blog, it is highly likely that they have heard the expression “once a sex offender always a sex offender.” Although even one sex crime is one too many, this study shows that short-term and intensive strategies for preventing sexual re-offense (such as high-quality treatment and sensible community supervision) are more likely to be effective than long-term, passive, and as-yet unproven methods such as Internet registries.

Further, this study shows the opposite side of a familiar coin. Prisons and other forms of punishment do not actually reduce crime (Smith, Goggin, & Gendreau, 2002). However, time spent successfully in the community is associated with desistance from crime. Recent research has highlighted the success of many community-based programs and their emphasis on developing a balanced, self-determined lifestyle (Wilson et al, 2009). This study points to the importance of using treatment and supervision to expedite desistance-related processes (such as stability, staying occupied, having prosocial supports, and implementing plans for self-improvement) rather than simply as tools for monitoring behavior.

Human beings naturally default to detecting and managing risks in the short term. Current research into assessment methods has helped us become even more adept at understanding and categorizing these risks. Developing effective means to ensure long-term public safety has taken longer. The most effective means for managing risks has presented far more challenges in our research and practice as well as the way we think about individual cases (such as Mike Tyson). Hanson and his colleagues’ findings point to the next steps we can take in supplementing our knowledge of risk with skillful reintegration.

As a final note, it is again important to note that not every crime is detected. However, it is noteworthy that these findings extend across all risk categories in a large sample and speak to the importance of allocating our most intensive resources to those who need them the most.

References

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