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THE IMPACT OF PAROLEES' PERCEPTION  
OF CONFIDENTIALITY OF  
THEIR SELF-REPORTED SEX CRIMES

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## ABSTRACT

Parole officers who supervise sex offenders need to know if parolees continue to be a risk for child molestation after their incarceration. One hundred and twenty convicted child molesters under Parole Supervision were asked to participate in two interviews about their sexual offenses: first by a parole officer in the parole office and then in a non-parole, psychologic setting by a psychologist. Seventy-four subjects agreed to participate in the parole setting, and 18 of those 74 agreed to participate in the psychologic setting. Hypotheses tested included whether perceived confidentiality affects reports of past child molestation or current urges to molest children or whether it improves the consistency between the offender's reports of their sex crimes and their arrest records. Results indicated that as confidentiality increased, reports of prior sex offenses and current urges to molest increased. The relevance of this finding to our current system of parole supervision is discussed.

**Kaplan, M.S., Abel, G.G., Cunningham-Rathner, J., & Mittleman, M.S. (1990). The impact of parolees' perception of confidentiality of their self-reported sex crimes. *Annals of Sex Research*, 3, 293-303.**

In recent years, public concern has escalated over the reported increase in sexual crimes against children. Data indicate that the potential effects on children who have been molested can be serious and long term (Burgess & Holstrom, 1974; Peters, 1976; DeFrancis, 1969).

A reduction in crimes of child molestation may depend in part on the ability of law enforcement personnel to identify child molesters who are likely to reoffend. In New York State, convicted child molesters are released from prison into the community to the supervision of a parole officer who is responsible for assessing whether the offender continues to have urges to molest children. Information about the offender is either provided by his self-report or from the offender's official, criminal record.

In most interview situations, child molesters attempt to present themselves in a favorable light, frequently by falsifying their self-reports (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard & Guild, 1977) so as to appear better in control of their urges to molest children. Other than self-report, the Parole Officer's only means of assessing the parolee is by his official criminal record. However, Farrington (1973) has stated that official records are not an accurate measure of deviant behavior. In addition, a number of researchers have concluded it is unlikely that valid, reliable self-reports will be made by molesters to parole officers who are part of the criminal justice system (Boyle, 1976; Joe & Gorsuch, 1977; Reamer, 1979).

A number of researchers have stressed the importance of confidentiality in obtaining self-reports from offenders (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy and Christenson, 1965). Studies by Mann and his colleagues (1976), Kirchoff and Thelan (1976), and Hardt & Hardt-Patterson (1977) showed frequent self-reports of sexual crimes when strict confidentiality was insured. In all, research indicates that confidentiality appears to be a major factor in accurate self-reports of sex offenders to an interviewer. This issue is critical since the parole officer is often the *only* professional in contact with the offender and he/she needs such information to evaluate the risk that the offender will reoffend.

The purpose of this study was (1) to determine the relationship between perceived confidentiality and the willingness to report sexual crimes consistent with the official crime record and (2) to determine if varying the perceived levels of confidentiality would affect sex offenders' self-reports of deviant sexual behaviors and fantasies.

## METHOD

### Research Participants

All research participants were adult males under parole supervision in New York City who had been convicted of child molestation. Of a total of 120 men, 74

agreed to participate in the first interview conducted by a parole officer, and 18 agreed to participate in a second interview conducted by a psychologist, under a more intense level of confidentiality. Participation in both phases of the study was voluntary.

## Procedure

The first set of interviews took place at the New York State Division of Parole and were conducted by a female parole officer (the principal author). After the interview, the parolee was asked if he would consent to a second interview with an expert in the area of sexual crimes. If agreed upon, an appointment was made by phone in the presence of the participant, or he was asked to call the specialist for an appointment. The second set of interviews took place at the Sexual Behavior Clinic of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, an out-patient clinic, and were conducted by a female psychologist.

The interviews in both settings were structured and included information regarding (1) the subject's self-report of deviant and non-deviant sexual behaviors and fantasies, (2) the amount of aggression used during commission of deviant sexual acts and (3) the subject's current estimate of his ability to control his urges to commit sexual crimes. A final portion of the interview required the subject to estimate the degree of perceived confidentiality of the interview. The official arrest record was obtained by the parole officer and compared to the interviews conducted in the two settings. As much data as possible was obtained from the files of parolees who could not be interviewed.

## RESULTS

### *Demographic Characteristics*

The mean age of the 74 men who participated in the parole setting was 35 years (range 17 to 70 years). Fifty-six percent were black, 27% were hispanic, 15% were caucasian, and 2% from other ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the participants were unskilled workers (62%) or semi-skilled workers (30%) as defined by Hollingshead (1957). Their education level ranged from less than seven years of school (16%) to completion of graduate school (3%). Forty-six percent of the sample had never been married and 31% were divorced or separated. The mean length of time incarcerated for the last sexual conviction was 66 months, with a minimum of 24 months and a maximum of 324 months.

The mean age of the 18 men who participated in both the parole and the psychological setting was 33 years (range 23 to 45 years). Fifty percent were black 16% hispanic and 33% were caucasian. The majority of the participants were

unskilled workers (55%) or semi-skilled workers (28%). Their education level ranged from less than seven years of school (11%) to completion of graduate school (11%). Fifty percent of the sample had never been married and 39% were divorced or separated. The mean length of time spent incarcerated for their last sexual conviction was 61.8 months, with a minimum of 32 months and a maximum of 120 months.

A comparison of the demographic characteristics of those agreeing to participate in both the parole and the psychologic setting interviews, versus those participating in only the parole setting interviews showed no significant differences in these two groups ( $t$ -test,  $p > .05$ ).

#### *Comparison of interviews in the parole setting to the official record*

Differences were found for the following crimes and victims: (1) Parolees self-reported a mean number of 0.82 convictions for child molestation compared to their official records, which showed a mean number of 1.40 convictions for child molestation. The amount of aggression used during these child molestation crimes was rated on a scale from 1 to 4 (1=non-coercion, 2=verbal coercion, 3=physical coercion, and 4=excessive physical coercion). The participants' self-reported a mean aggression rating of 1.13 indicating that they had not used force during the molestations. However, the official record indicated that physical force was used during the molestations, with a mean aggression rating of 2.65. This was a significant difference ( $p < .01$ ). (2) Twenty-one of 60 participants (35%) underreported the number of children they had molested. Sixty-nine percent of participants underreported the amount of aggression used during the molestation. Neither of these differences were statistically significant.

#### *Comparison of interviews in the parole setting, official records, and interviews conducted in the psychologic setting*

Of greatest interest were those offenders interviewed in both the parole and psychologic setting, since the face validity of confidentiality was markedly different in these two settings. There were eighteen parolees who completed both interviews. Table 1 presents the comparisons of these participants' official records, self-reports in the parole setting, and the psychological setting.

Official records indicated these 18 parolees had been found guilty of an average of 2.24 sex offenses against children under eighteen years of age. In the parole setting they admitted to having committed an average of 1.94 child molestations, (S.D. = 3.84, range = 0 - 12, median = 0) but in the psychologic setting these same offenders self-reported an astonishing average of 54.61 child

**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Means of Self-Reported Sex Crimes in**  
**Parole and Psychologic Settings**  
**with Official Records (N=18)**

	Official Record Convictions	Parole Setting Reports of Convictions	Parole Setting Self-Report of Acts	Psychologic Setting Self-Report of Acts
Average Child Molestations	2.24	0.82	1.94 (sd=3.84)	54.61 (sd=146.94)
Average Non-Child Molestation Sex Offenses	0.53	0.94	1.06 (sd=2.53)	20.83 (sd=79.01)

molestations (S.D. = 146.94, range = 0 - 599, median = 1). The differences were significant by the Wilcoxon test ( $z = 2.45$ ,  $p = .01$ ).

In the parole setting, offenders reported an average of 1.06 non-child molestation sex offenses (S.D. = 2.53, range = 0-10, median = 0). In the psychologic setting this reporting rose considerably to 20.83 non-child molestation sex offenses (S.D. = 79.01, range = 0 - 337, median = 0.5). The differences were significant by the Wilcoxon test ( $z = 2.37$ ,  $p = .02$ ).

### *Perceived Confidentiality*

Two questions during the interview were designed to rate perceived confidentiality. The answers from the parole interview (with limited confidentiality) were compared to the psychologic interview (with extensive confidentiality).

A reliability test between the two confidentiality questions showed that only in the psychological setting were interviews reliable (Alpha = 0.84), indicating that the participants perceived the confidentiality questions differently at the parole setting versus the psychologic setting.

**Table 2**  
**Comparison of Sex Acts Using Paired Sample T-Tests of**  
**Child Molester's Self Reports at the Parole and**  
**the Psychologic Setting**

Category of Sex Acts	N	Parole Raw Means	Psychologic Setting Raw Means	t	p
Mean number of attempts	13	2.23	35.92	-1.88	.05*
Mean number of completions	13	4.08	73.77	-1.81	.05*
Mean number of victims	13	4.69	55.85	-1.06	NS*

**\*Log Transformations were used for these variables because they were highly skewed.**

**One tailed t-test was with pooled variance estimate.**

**Reports were obtained from 13 subjects interviewed in both settings.**

#### *Self Report of Urges*

All participants were also asked (a) if they currently had urges to commit sexual offenses (an urge was defined as a strong feeling or impulse, which was clearly explained in the interview) and (b) a variety of questions regarding past deviant sexual behaviors. Since only two men in the parole interview (of 59 who responded to the question) reported any current deviant sexual urges, responses could not be statistically compared to responses at the psychologic setting.

The variable of current urges was difficult to evaluate since the participants were probably suspicious that reporting current urges would put them at greater risk to return to jail.

#### *Self Report of Past Deviant Behavior*

The dependent variables designed to measure past deviant sexual behavior were: (1) number of previous attempted deviant sexual acts, (2) number of completed deviant sexual acts and (3) number of victims (Table 2).

T-tests comparing the mean number of self-reports of child molester's prior attempts as reported in the parole setting and the psychologic setting were

statistically significant ( $t = -1.88, p < .05$ ).

T-tests comparing the mean number of child molesters' self-reports of completed acts in the two settings were also statistically significant ( $t = -1.81, p < .05$ ).

T-tests comparing the mean number of self-reports of victims were not statistically significant ( $t = -1.06, p > .05$ ).

There was a great similarity in the way the two confidentiality questions were answered in both settings, but a great difference in the reporting of the number of prior deviant behaviors in these two settings. These results suggest that the more confidentiality the parolees felt, the more they were willing to self-report their past sexual history.

## DISCUSSION

This study focused on interviewing convicted child molesters in an attempt to identify which, if any, continued to have urges to molest children following their incarceration, so that treatment, if needed, could be recommended. There was a great deal of difficulty in motivating parolees to participate and follow through with the second interview at the clinic. In the course of data collection, several factors arose which might have inhibited the study, including the following:

*Interviewer Gender.* Although both interviewers established a common interview procedure, since all of the interviews were conducted by one female psychologist and one parole officer, differences in reporting may have been due to interviewers' personalities. In addition, since the interview with the psychologist always followed the interview with the parole officer, the order of the interviews may have affected self-reports.

*Parolee Motivation.* As anticipated, parolee motivation was problematic and the attrition of cases was a serious problem. Undoubtedly, there are a number of factors that inhibit parolees from participating in assessment, such as their apparent lack of trust in the criminal justice system or, any individual associated with that system, and a fear of being used in some way by participation in the study. Since only 18 men kept their clinic appointments, future studies with parolees should employ incentives to participate, such as money for participation or less scheduled parole office contacts should they participate.

*Parole Officer Motivation.* Experience gained from this study indicates that the attitudes of parole officers strongly influence whether sexual offenders will be referred for psychologic assessments or treatment. Since many parole officers feel punishment is more suitable than treatment for offenders

(Shihadah; 1973, Ohlin, Pivan & Pappanfort, 1956), perhaps an educational program for parole officers should be implemented to stress that (a) self-reports of sex offenders need to be reliable if appropriate referral is to occur and (b) effective psychologic treatment is available in many communities (Abel, et al., 1984; Abel et al., 1988; Becker, Kaplan, & Kavoussi, 1988).

*Physical Setting.* Perceived confidentiality may have been affected by the environment. The research was conducted in two settings that were radically different in terms of individual privacy. In the parole office setting, there is a lack of private offices, where conversations can easily be overheard, and files are in full view and easily accessible to others. In the clinic setting, parolees were seen in an enclosed, private office which is more spacious, quiet, and where files are not visible.

The results of this study highlight a major dilemma for those parole officers responsible for the supervision of child molesters after their release from prison. The parole officer is not perceived as a person the child molester can trust regarding his past history of child molestation and his ongoing urges to commit child molestation. The dilemma is that the parole officer is the very person most likely to be able to access such child molesters, since they supervise parolees. Even when a parole officer promises confidentiality (as in this study) the parolee is very reluctant to reveal the extent of his past deviant sexual behavior and his continued interest in same. With increased evidence of confidentiality and interviewing being done in a psychologic setting, parolees are much more likely to reveal the extent of their prior deviant sexual behavior and ongoing need for treatment. Unfortunately, the barriers to accessing the psychologic setting are extensive as reflected by the small percentage of men willing to participate in the psychologic interview. This study reveals the extent of the problem which will hopefully stimulate attempts to solve this dilemma for the parolee, the parole officer and society.

The major implication of this study is that the degree of perceived confidentiality strongly influences parolees' willingness to accurately report their past deviant sexual behavior and present child molestation urges. This study points out the inconsistencies between parolees' self-reports of past sex offenses and the official records. In order to better understand what kind of problem a parolee has had, it is of utmost importance to substantiate the self-reports of parolees with the official records.

In this study, the participants were minimally motivated to undergo psychologic evaluation or treatment. In addition, the attitudes of parole officers as well as differences in physical settings seem to affect the willingness of parolees to report their need for treatment. Therefore to increase the accuracy of the self-reports of sex crimes or urges, it is recommended that a better system of

confidentiality between the parolee and the parole officer be established so the parole officer is more likely to know the parolees' problems and risk for reoffense. Without such a system the parole officer is like a blind pilot, entrusted with the responsibility to help his/her parolees, but blinded by a lack of awareness of what problems the parolee has and whether he needs treatment or not.

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