

SEX OFFENDERS: SPECIALISTS, GENERALISTS—OR BOTH?

A 32-year Criminological Study

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Sexual offending is on the political agenda but there has been little research focus on the four offence categories—indecent assault against a female, indecent assault against a male, indecency between males and unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16—which together comprise the vast majority of convictions for sexual offences in England and Wales. We consider the criminal record (1963–94 inclusive) of the 6,097 males convicted of one of these offences in 1973. The results are discussed in terms of criminality, heterogeneity, dangerousness and specialization. By recognizing two levels of analysis—general crime level and sex crime level—we argue that sex offenders can be both generalists and specialists; they may range widely across a spectrum of offences but still specialize within sexual offending.

In most Western countries sex offending has been on the political agenda in recent years. In the United Kingdom, a plethora of recent legislation, such as the Sex Offenders Act 1997, the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, the Children (Protection from Offenders) Regulation 1997 and the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, has focused fully or in part on sex offending. What started as something resembling a moral panic about the sexual abuse of children has now widened its scope considerably.

Recently there has been a dangerous tendency for sexual offending to be set apart from other types of offending, creating a kind of criminal apartheid (Soothill and Francis 1997). So, for example, Marshall (1997) in his recent commentary on the number of persons in England and Wales who would be candidates for a sex offender register makes two interesting observations—first, that ‘reconviction rates for sexual offenders are low in comparison to other types of offenders’ and secondly, that ‘it is unlikely that these [reconviction rates] are an accurate representation of reoffending levels’.¹ We have discussed these observations (Soothill and Francis 1997), but we can go further. First, to talk of ‘sexual offenders’ rather suggests that they are a homogeneous and coherent group. There are dangers in both theoretical and policy terms in believing that this is the case when the evidence may indicate otherwise. Secondly, to talk of ‘sexual offenders’ suggests that they are somehow distinct from the general run of offenders. While some may be, there are many others whose sexual offending is just another type of behaviour they are displaying within a broad criminal repertoire.

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¹ Marshall (1994) provides some of the reasons for this undoubtedly correct assertion.

One approach has been to try to distinguish between ‘specialists’ and ‘generalists’. This is familiar territory for criminologists (e.g. Tarling 1993, ch. 8), but the task may have disappointing results unless some further conceptual distinctions are made. We suggest that what plagues criminology is the insistence that offenders *either* specialize *or* are versatile. We need to recognize that they can do both. This becomes understandable when one appreciates that, in relation to sex offending (and the argument can be extended to any kind of offending), there are essentially two levels of analysis—analysis of their participation in crime in general and, within their sexual offending career, the analysis of *specific* kinds of sex offending. Offenders may or may not specialize in sex offending within their general criminal career, and may or may not specialize in specific kinds of sex offending within their sexual criminal career. An analogy may be helpful. A person may play many sports, but specialize in football with a favoured position of centre forward. A person can, indeed, be regarded as a versatile sportsperson *and* a specialist football centre forward at the same time. A sex offender can behave in the same way. Our task is to explore some of these variations.

A consideration of the similarities and differences in the criminal histories of persons committing very different kinds of sex offences has been curiously neglected. Certainly this neglect has had an effect on discussion on the specialization or versatility of sexual offenders; the area has not been satisfactorily developed. However, Simon (1997) has recently pointed out that ‘offenders who commit sex crimes are . . . treated as specialists by the legal and mental health systems’ (p. 41). In fact, this is implicit in the Sex Offenders Act 1997. Nevertheless, Simon has also concluded that ‘although there are a few specialists, the majority of criminal offenders are generalists who exhibit wide versatility in offending’ (p. 35), while stating in relation to sex offenders that ‘many studies unwittingly find that offenders who commit sex crimes are not specialists’ (p. 43). It is against this important backdrop that this study develops.

In this article we focus on two kinds of relationship:

1. What is the relationship between sexual offending and committing other types of offences? Following from this we consider to what extent can those convicted of sexual offending be regarded, on the one hand, as *specialized* sexual offenders, or be considered, on the other hand, as *versatile* in terms of committing a range of criminal offences as well as sex offending?
2. What is the relationship between different kinds of sex offending? Do those persons convicted of one kind of sex offending tend to be convicted of the same kind of sex offending on other occasions? In other words, do sex offenders *specialize* in one kind of illicit sexual behaviour or can they be regarded as rather more *versatile* in the range of illicit sexual behaviour they indulge in?

While there have been some important consciousness-raising efforts encouraged by the women’s movement in relation to rape since the early 1970s and by social workers in relation to child sex abuse since the mid-1980s, there has been a dearth of interest in the main categories of sex offending measured in terms of frequency of conviction. In *Criminal Statistics: England and Wales*, indictable sexual offences are divided into 13 categories. In most years, the top four in terms of the *numbers* of convicted offenders are those committing indecent assault against a female, those committing indecent assault against a male, those committing indecency between males and, finally, those having

unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16. Together they comprise the majority of sexual offenders. Over the past ten years, *Criminal Statistics* shows that about three-quarters of those found guilty or cautioned for an indictable sex offence had committed one of these offences as their principal offence (ranging from 72 per cent in 1987 to 79 per cent in 1996).

Interestingly, these four offences divide on the two important dimensions of consent and gender relationships as Table 1 shows.

Indecent assaults on males or females are essentially non-consensual, while indecency between males is an offence between consenting adults. Unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 is more problematic; because of the age of the victim: 'This is an offence whether the girl consents or not, but if there is no consent the charge is likely to be rape, whereas, if there *is* consent the charge will probably be unlawful sexual intercourse' (Walmsley and White 1979), which Thorp (1998) has recently endorsed. We would term this offence, therefore, as consensual, while accepting the probability that some cases will actually be non-consensual. There is also a gender divide; indecent assaults on males and indecency between males predominantly involve males in the roles of both offender and victim, while unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 and indecent assaults against females predominantly involve males as offenders and females as victims.²

Certainly these four sex offences provide important contrasts in terms of consent and gender relationships and a useful context in which to consider potential differences between sex offenders.

TABLE 1 *The four most numerous sexual offences committed in 1973 in terms of consent and gender relationships*

	Males with males	Males with females
Consent	Indecency between males	Unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16
Non-consent	Indecent assault on a male	Indecent assault on a female

Data

The source for the empirical work is a search of the Home Office Offenders Index which identified 7,442 offenders convicted of a sexual offence³ in 1973. The small number of female offenders (n=41) have been excluded from this study. For all the offenders we have a record of their criminal history for the years 1963 to 1994 inclusive; that is to say, details of their recorded *convictions* for standard-list offences over this period, but not of any offending behaviour which has either gone undetected or received a caution. However, 32 years is a long period of observation and helps to limit the likelihood of

² Females can be involved as the perpetrators of indecent assaults against males or females either as principals or abettors: also, in the case of unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16, a female can be charged, in appropriate circumstances, as an abettor.

³ The offences on which the series were selected were all the indictable sexual offences (with the exception of offences concerned with 'obscene publications') and the summary offence of 'gross indecency with children' (in addition to the indictable offence of this nature).

offenders continuing over a sustained period without being successfully convicted on another occasion.

We focus on all males convicted of indecent assault against a female (n=3,070), or indecent assault against a male (n=763), or indecency between males (n=1,529), or unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 (n=763, and hereafter referred to as ‘USI under 16’) as a ‘principal sex offence’⁴ in England and Wales in 1973. As stated, these offenders comprise the majority of sex offenders. Our study follows the legal definitions for the four offences.⁵ Our interest is in their criminal record over the entire 32 years (1963–94 inclusive). This time-span will cover the most active years for most persons in the series; at the time of the 1973 target conviction, the average age of the offender is 31, but there are differences between the groups. The average age of those involving females is lower (24 years for USI under 16 and 29 years for the indecent assault group) than those involving males (34 years for the indecent assault group and 36 years for the offence of indecency between males). It is unusual for cases of indecency between males to involve offenders under 20 years and for those committing USI under 16 to be 40 years or over.

One might have expected the differential age profile of the four groups to have an impact on the nature and extent of the criminal records. However, an internal check on the data, using only the 20–39 year age group, indicated that the general findings of crime profile differences discussed in the next section are retained even when the offenders who are under 20 or 40 and over are excluded. As a consequence we feel justified in including in the analysis all members of each group.

General Crime Profiles

First, we consider the proportion of each group with a conviction on another occasion in the 32 years. The two consensual groups have contrasting outcomes. Those convicted of USI under 16, with 76 per cent, have the highest proportion of any group, while the offenders convicted of indecency between males have the lowest proportion with another conviction (37 per cent). The two non-consensual groups, involving indecent assaults on males and females, are very similar, with 61 and 63 per cent respectively, and occupy an intermediate position compared with the two consensual groups.

In considering the development of crime profiles for each group over the 32-year period of observation (1963–94 inclusive⁶), we focus on the ten groups of offences which cover all the standard-list offences identified in the Offenders Index. The percentages in

⁴ The ‘principal sex offence’ is that which, when there are different types of sex offence convictions at the same court date, is considered to be the most serious—defined either by the sentence imposed by the court or, when the sentence is the same, by the maximum sentence available for such an offence.

⁵ Details of the relevant legislation are as follows: indecent assault on a female—s. 14(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 1956; indecent assault on a male—s. 15(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 1956; indecency between males—s. 13 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956, qualified by s. 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 (legislation effective from 1995 changing ‘the age of 21 or over’ to ‘the age of 18 or over’ is not relevant to the current analysis, which covers convictions up to the end of 1994); unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16—s. 6(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 1956.

⁶ The Offenders Index at the Home Office started in 1963 so all the series can be traced back for the ten years prior to 1973. The Index collects details of all standard-list offences. Standard-list offences include all indictable offences and the more serious non-indictable offences.

Table 2 are defined as follows: the category of 'sexual offences' excludes all sexual convictions occurring at the same date as the 1973 target conviction; the remaining categories include all offences occurring at any time in the 32-year period. Each offence total is the percentage of persons in that group who have at least one conviction for this offence category.⁷

Hence, one can identify that approaching one-quarter (24 per cent) of those convicted of indecent assault against a female in 1973 had a conviction for violence against the person at some point during the 32 years; this contrasts markedly with those convicted of indecency between males where only one in 20 (5 per cent) had a conviction of violence during the 32 years of observation. The percentages are highlighted in bold where a group's proportion differs significantly from that of the remaining sex offenders in the entire 1973 series (n=7,401). So, those convicted of indecent assault on a female had a significantly *higher* proportion of cases where there was also a conviction for violence at some point, while those convicted of indecency between males had a significantly *lower* proportion of cases who also had a violence conviction at some point.

So do the four groups have different general crime profiles? From Table 2 it is clear that they do. There are many statistically significant differences (highlighted in bold) for the groups compared with the total cases in the series—both higher and lower than would be expected by chance; also the groups are very different from each other. An interest is whether the two groups convicted of a 'consensual' offence are similar to each other as well as the two groups convicted of a 'non-consensual' offence in 1973. In fact, the two groups convicted of a 'consensual' offence in 1973 are dramatically different in terms of their general crime profiles. Those convicted of indecency between males have a significantly *lower* proportion of convictions for all kinds of crime compared with the total series. In contrast, those convicted of USI under 16 have a much *higher* proportion for all kinds of crime. Interestingly, the exception is for sexual offences, where a *lower* proportion of *both* groups is convicted of a sexual offence on another occasion; around one in five in both groups are so convicted. So, there is a similarity in relation to sexual convictions on another occasion, but otherwise those convicted of indecency between males have a comparatively *low* general crime profile, while those convicted of USI under 16 have a comparatively *high* general crime profile.

Those convicted of the two groups of non-consensual offences do not display quite such dramatic contrasts. However, importantly, those convicted of assaults against *females* have a disproportionately *high* proportion convicted of violence, burglary, and theft but a *low* proportion with other convictions for sexual offences; those convicted of indecent assaults against *males* tend to be the exact mirror image with *low* proportions for violence, burglary and theft and a statistically *high* proportion of cases being convicted of sexual offences on another occasion.

Hence, it is evident that both groups convicted of 'consensual' offences differ quite significantly and both groups convicted of 'non-consensual' offences also differ significantly. In brief, the notion of 'consent' is not a good discriminator in terms of considering criminal profiles. However, another pattern becomes apparent when one considers the gender of the wronged party.

⁷ It is important to recognize that that there is no 'intensity' score built into the analysis. In other words, the criterion is being convicted for the relevant offence on at least *one* other occasion and so does not consider on *how many* other occasions this may have happened.

TABLE 2 Convictions for other offences over the 32-year observation period (1963–94 inclusive)

Broad offence categories (used by Criminal Statistics)	Convicted of a 'non-consensual' offence in 1973		Convicted of a 'consensual' offence in 1973		All males in 1973 series of sex offenders %
	Indecent assault on a female %	Indecent assault on a male %	Indecency between males %	Unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 %	
Violence against the person	24.0 (H)	13.9 (L)	5.0 (L)	31.3 (H)	20.1
Sexual offences	24.5 (L)	41.2 (H)	22.3 (L)	19.3 (L)	25.8
Burglary	24.2 (H)	15.2 (L)	5.2 (L)	44.8 (H)	21.5
Robbery	3.1	1.8	0.7 (L)	4.6 (H)	3.0
Theft and handling stolen goods	45.4 (H)	37.7 (L)	17.5 (L)	65.2 (H)	41.4
Fraud and forgery	14.6	14.8	5.8 (L)	23.8 (H)	13.9
Criminal damage	14.1 (H)	9.2	2.7 (L)	21.4 (H)	11.3
Drugs offences	3.1	0.9 (L)	1.0 (L)	6.5 (H)	3.3
Other	11.7	10.0	3.9 (L)	19.7 (H)	11.5
Motoring offences (indictable)	3.3	1.2 (L)	0.7 (L)	6.0 (H)	2.9
At least one of violence, sexual or robbery offences	40.4	46.9 (H)	25.8 (L)	42.3	39.3
At least one conviction for another offence (1963–1994)	62.8 (H) (n = 3,070)	61.3 (n = 763)	36.7 (L) (n = 1,529)	76.2 (H) (n = 735)	59.8 (n = 7,401)

Notes: (1) Statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in the proportions with a conviction for the relevant offence of each group compared to the remaining offenders in the 1973 series are in bold, together with the direction of the difference: (H)—higher, (L)—lower.

(2) The category of 'sexual offences' excludes the 1973 sexual conviction under study and all other sexual convictions occurring at the same date; the remaining categories include all offences occurring at any time in the 32-year period.

Essentially what emerges is that the two groups offending against *males* tend to have a significantly *lower* criminal profile compared with the general series. The exception is sexual offences, where those convicted of indecent assault against males have the *highest* proportion convicted at other times (41 per cent) of any of the four groups; those convicted of indecency between males continue to have a significantly *lower* proportion so convicted in comparison with the general series.

The two groups convicted of offending against *females* tend to have a significantly *higher* criminal profile compared with the general series. However, here again, the exception lies in the category of sexual offences, where, in both cases, a *lower* proportion of the group have convictions at other times. Hence, the vast majority in these groups cannot be considered to be sexual recidivists.

The dispersion among the ten broad categories may mask the proportion who are serious threats to the person on more than one occasion. In Table 2 we have also considered the proportions in each group who have at least one other conviction for a violence, sexual or robbery offence—that is, offences against the person. We find that in three of the four groups (the USI under 16 group and both of the indecent assault groups) just over four out of ten persons are convicted of an offence against the person over the 32-year period. However, there are important differences between the three groups. The group committing indecent assault against a female are almost equally likely to commit another sexual or a violence offence. In contrast, those committing indecent assault against a male are much more likely to be involved in committing another sexual offence, whereas the USI under 16 offenders are much more likely to be violent, and to be involved in robbery. The fourth group (indecency between males) are far less likely to be convicted of a crime against the person, with only one in four of offenders thus convicted; however, most of these offenders are involved in sexual crime.

Sex Crime Profiles

Table 3 shows the proportions of each group who are convicted of another sex offence at some point over the 32-year period. Again a person may have an entry under any offence category.

The outcome is remarkably clear-cut; the members of each group are, when they are convicted of another sex offence, most likely to be convicted of the same kind of sex offence as the target offence. The proportions committing other types of sex offences are, in comparison, mostly very low. This consistent pattern for each group produces the general sense that sex offenders are fairly ‘specialized’ within the range of sex offending categories.

The main exception to this overall picture is the group convicted of indecent assault on males. Whilst members of this group are, like the other groups, most likely to commit the same type of offence, their sex offending is far from exclusively confined to indecent assaults on males. 12 per cent have been convicted of indecent assault on a female, 9 per cent of gross indecency with a child, 9 per cent of indecency between males, and 7 per cent of buggery. Both the range and level of activity suggests strongly that the group of offenders committing indecent assault on a male contains the most serious *sexual* predators of the four groups, who care little about either the gender or age of their

TABLE 3 *Convictions for other types of sexual offence over the 32-year observation period (1963–94)*

Sexual offence categories	Convicted of a 'non-consensual' offence in 1973		Convicted of a 'consensual' offence in 1973	
	Indecent assault on a female %	Indecent assault on a male %	Indecency between males %	Unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 %
Buggery and attempted buggery	0.9	6.9	1.2	0.7
Indecent assault on a male	2.3	26.7	3.5	0.5
Indecency between males	0.8	9.2	16.0	0.5
Rape and attempted rape	1.9	0.0	0.1	0.8
Indecent assault on a female	20.9	12.1	1.0	6.7
USI under 13	0.6	0.3	0.1	0.8
USI under 16	1.9	0.7	0.1	12.9
Incest	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.3
Procuration	0.2	1.4	1.2	0.3
Abduction	0.4	0.0	0.0	1.1
Bigamy	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Soliciting by a man	0.1	2.1	3.7	0.0
Gross indecency with a child	2.7	9.2	1.2	0.8
	(n = 3,070)	(n = 763)	(n = 1,529)	(n = 735)

The 1973 sexual conviction under study and all other sexual convictions occurring at the same date have been excluded from this table. Bold figures indicate the cell with the highest percentage in each column; this coincides in each case with the offence for which that group was convicted in 1973.

victims or the nature of their offending behaviour. Further, whilst this group contains a relatively low proportion of persons convicted of a violence offence (see Table 2), it is important to recognize that the nature of their sex offending behaviour is dominated by *non-consensual* activity.

The only other variation from the pattern of 'specialization' is the 7 per cent of USI under 16 offenders with a conviction for indecent assault on a female on another occasion. While consistent in terms of their *heterosexual* preference, there is a small minority, similar in age to the majority, who are willing to engage in non-consensual sex offending. This, coupled with this group's very high conviction rate for violence, suggests that it would be misleading to believe that this group is totally characterized by illegal but consensual activity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The topic of sexual offending is an important one. Certainly it would be inappropriate to deny that there is a problem regarding sex offending. Serious sexual offending both disturbs the general public who may not have suffered directly and may cause permanent damage to those who have. However, one should also be aware of the problems of exaggerating these dangers; potential outcomes of such exaggeration may be to unnecessarily increase the fear of the public, hinder the genuine rehabilitation of offenders who have changed their ways, while wasting valuable resources on those who do not need increased surveillance. We need to ensure that the fear of the public is

realistic, to help those who need help and to spend the resources of social control on those who really do need surveillance.

Certainly it needs to be recognized that any lessons from this study in helping with the implementation of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 and similar legislation need to be drawn carefully. It is important to stress that the meanings of legal categories do change over time. So, for example, while it remains illegal, having sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 has a different connotation now than it did a quarter of a century ago. Similarly, there have been changes of societal reaction towards homosexuality which may impinge on the enforcement of legal categories. The British Social Attitudes Survey, reported by Thorp (1998), shows that the percentage of people agreeing with the statement 'Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is always wrong' has been declining since 1987. *Coerced* sex—whether homosexual or heterosexual—should be the focus of concern. In contrast, *consensual* sex—though certain behaviour may still be proscribed—should not be a major worry. The Howard League for Penal Reform (1985) reached a similar conclusion in their report recommending changes in the law for sexual offending, taking the freedom of the individual to regulate his or her sexual conduct in private as a central principle, provided that children are protected, and there is freedom from exploitation. It seems inappropriate for this type of behaviour to be captured within the provisions of the Sex Offenders Act 1997. Here, however, we are more concerned with some of the underlying and more fundamental issues.

The numbers in our series are large, but the dangers of interpretation are manifold. Nevertheless, we believe our study has produced some challenging findings in relation to male sex offenders:

1. *Criminality—sex offenders differ in their likelihood of being convicted on another occasion.* While, overall, 58 per cent of these four groups of sex offenders are convicted for another offence, the range is wide. At one end of the spectrum, 37 per cent of those convicted of indecency between males in 1973 are convicted of a standard-list offence on another occasion, while at the other extreme the figure is more than double (76 per cent) for those convicted of USI under 16; the two groups convicted of indecent assault on females and males fall roughly mid-way in this range (63 and 61 per cent respectively).
2. *Heterogeneity—sex offenders differ in terms of general offending behaviour.* A higher proportion of those committing *heterosexual* offences (i.e. indecent assault on a female or unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16) tend to be convicted for violence against the person, property offences (i.e. burglary and theft) and criminal damage compared with the rest of the series. However, a lower proportion of these offenders commit *sexual* offences on other occasions. In contrast, those committing *homosexual* offences (i.e. indecent assault on a male or indecency between males) are the mirror image. They are much less likely, compared with all other sex offenders, to be convicted of violence or property offences, but those committing indecent assault on a male are much more likely to be convicted of sexual offences on other occasions.
3. *Dangerousness—a significant minority of these offenders are convicted of another dangerous offence against the person (defined as a sexual offence at another time, or a violence or robbery offence) during the 32-year observation period.* In terms of committing these kinds of offences, the proportions for three of the groups are very similar—indecent

assault on a male (47 per cent); USI under 16 (42 per cent); indecent assault on a female (40 per cent). However, these figures mask some important differences with regard to how these totals are reached. Those convicted of indecent assault on a male are much more likely to be involved with other sexual offences; those convicted of USI under 16 are much more likely to be convicted of offences of violence against the person than specifically sexual offences on another occasion; those convicted of indecent assault on a female are evenly spread between sexual or violence offences if they have other convictions. Those convicted of indecency between males are much less likely to be convicted for violence offences or for sex offences on other occasions; in fact, if they are, it is much more likely to be for a sexual offence—members of this group rarely seem to be involved in violence offences.

4. *Specialization—sex offenders are much more specialized in their sexual offending behaviour than perhaps has been hitherto thought.* If members of a group are convicted of another sexual offence, then they are likely to be convicted of the same kind of sex offence. While this is true of all groups, some are more exclusively confined to their own offence group than others. It is the group of those convicted of *indecent assault on males* who in their midst seem to contain a sub-group of sexual predators who care little about the gender or age of their victims and display a wider variety of sexual offending behaviour than most. The particular recent concern about those offenders who are convicted of indecent assault offences against young males seems warranted. In contrast, there should be generally less concern about those convicted of the consensual offence of indecency between males.

The empirical results have been presented in terms of focusing on criminality, heterogeneity, dangerousness and specialization. The emphasis of the paper has been on identifying some similarities and differences between these four major groups of sex offenders. The similarity between all the groups is that the majority are not convicted of a violence or robbery offence or of a sexual offence on another occasion. The differences emerge in speculating about the size, nature and threat of the minority of each of the four offence groups. Although one can only paint with a broad brush, the risks from these active minorities seem very different. They can be characterized quite briefly.

Those convicted of the consensual *homosexual* offence of indecency between males in 1973 do not seem a major threat either as criminals or as sexual predators. Those convicted of either of the two *heterosexual* offences (i.e. indecent assault on a female or USI under 16) and who have other convictions seem to come from a more general pool of offenders, being involved in a variety of criminal activity. The group of USI under 16 seems, more usually, to display a problem of violence rather than sexual behaviour. The active minority among those convicted of indecent assault against a female seem evenly split between being sexual predators, on the one hand, and violent predators, on the other hand; it is perhaps not unexpected that such a large offence group should contain some distinct sub-groups. The surprise is the evenness of the split.

The most unexpected result and perhaps the most important is the need to recognize that the group convicted of the homosexual offence of indecent assault on a male contains a significant minority who are a major sexual threat. Certainly, the recent concerns expressed about the dangers from those who commit sexual offences against males under 16 seem to be very real ones. If they do have another sexual conviction it is

likely to be for indecent assault on a male. However, among their other sexual activity, a sizeable minority is also convicted of offences against women.

Our contention is that what plagues criminology is an insistence on the dichotomy that offenders *either* specialize *or* are versatile. Certainly there is some evidence that sex offenders may specialize (e.g. Prentky *et al.* 1989). Even amongst offenders who molest children, offenders who commit incest are believed to specialize and to be different from the other offenders who molest children (e.g. Gilgun and Connor 1989; Hayashino *et al.* 1995). Equally, however, Simon quotes substantial evidence that sex offenders do *not* specialize (e.g. Abel *et al.* 1987; Aljazireh 1993; Fehrenbach *et al.* 1986; Simon *et al.* 1992; Weinrott and Saylor 1991). In fact, Weinrott and Saylor make the important point that they found more versatility based on self-report than based on official records. Simon concludes that ‘the claim for specialization in the face of evidence to the contrary plagues the literature on offenders who commit sex crimes’ (p. 43). However, we need to recognize that offenders can be both specialized and versatile.

Our own study suggests that both levels are operative in considering our four groups of male sex offenders. Certainly, at the general crime level, some groups are more versatile than others. The USI under 16 group, for example, has a versatility which ranges across the spectrum of offences, whereas, in contrast, those convicted of indecency between males who have other convictions are predominantly sexual reoffenders. However, at the sexual crime level, a rather different picture emerges. All groups were much more specialized than expected—that is, if they were convicted of a sexual offence on another occasion, then it was most likely to be a conviction for the same type as occurred in 1973. In short, by recognizing the existence of the two levels, we argue that sex offenders may be specialists, they may be generalists, or they may be both.

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