Sex Crime, Offenders, and Society

A Critical Look at Sexual Offending and Policy

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Preface

In contemporary American society sex crimes represent the “worst of the worst” offenses—particularly those committed against vulnerable victims such as children. At the same time, society’s definition of “sex crime” has expanded and changed in recent decades. For example, a wide range of sex offenders fit under this broad umbrella—from those who commit statutory rape offenses and non-contact sex crimes to those who sexually assault and murder victims. Thus, substantial variation is evident across this broad category. All too often though, discussions about sex offending and sexual violence in the U.S. have been reduced to pithy arguments. To illustrate, there is the impression among the public and, to a large extent, policymakers, that all sex offenders are essentially homogenous—committing similar types of crimes and doing so because of an underlying mental illness. This view, in turn, has translated into a one-size-fits-all, “get tough” policy response, primarily one that has emphasized longer prison sentences and a host of post-incarceration sanctions. Accordingly, over the last two decades, sex crime legislation has become a “growth industry”—with varied responses designed to curtail sexual offending currently in place across the nation. In short, public discussions and debates have increasingly emphasized sex offender management as a crime prevention tool, but have done so too simplistically—without taking into account the substantial heterogeneity across sex offenders and sex crime.

The end result? Some scholars have claimed that such laws built around a flawed logic of sexual offending are not likely to reduce sex crime. If indeed true, the varied efforts to prevent sex crime—undoubtedly well-intended—could very well be in vain. This book argues that moving beyond simplistic views about sex crime is critical toward fully appreciating the complexity of sexual offending and, most importantly, informing our efforts to prevent it. In turn, such an approach has the potential to lead to policies rooted in empirical evidence and not on perceived notions about sex crime and sexual victimization. The overarching goal of the text is to introduce readers to a broad overview of research and policy issues concerning sex offenders and sex crime reform. This focus has become a critical one in current criminological and criminal justice scholarship. A growing body of literature has been devoted toward understanding the nature and extent of sex crime, its causes, and public and policy responses to sex offending. Yet, relatively few scholarly texts which summarize and review this large knowledge base currently exist. This text seeks to fill this void by examining three critical dimensions of sex crime scholarship which are covered in twelve chapters. Part one discusses the nature and extent of sexual offending and prominent explanations of sex crime. In contrast, part two describes societal responses to sex offenders. The third and final focus of the text examines sex crime policy and reform in the U.S. These broad domains are further described below.

The first theme, “The Nature and Extent of Sex Offending and Prominent Theoretical Explanations,” which encompasses four chapters, reviews what is known about sexual offending and sex crime. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to sex crime and current controversies surrounding prominent sex crime laws. Chapter 2 reviews methods to measure sexual offenses and victimization. Chapter 3 traces recent sex crime patterns and trends
in the U.S. Chapter 4 applies theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding the etiology of sex offending.

The text then moves into the second substantive domain, “Societal Responses to Sexual Offending,” which includes three chapters. This focus is particularly relevant toward a broader understanding of sexual offenders and sex crime policy given that public opinion, and more generally, societal impressions, have played a significant role in the creation of sex crime laws. Here, Chapter 5 evaluates prominent misperceptions of sex crime, offenders, and policy. Chapter 6 moves toward investigating public opinion about sexual offending and sex crime legislation. In contrast, Chapter 7 traces the historical development of societal efforts to respond to sexual offending in the U.S.

The final focus of the text, “Sex Crime Policy and Reform,” analyzes prominent laws and policies developed in recent decades to punish and control sex offenders. It includes the remaining five chapters. Chapter 8 assesses the logic and effectiveness of sex crime legislation. Chapter 9 moves toward reviewing methods to determine sex offender recidivism and treatment issues. In comparison, Chapter 10 examines variability in the enactment of sex crime laws nationally, and also variation within the content of sex crime reforms. Chapter 11 reviews current legal challenges to sex crime legislation. Finally, Chapter 12 concludes the text with an emphasis on the future of sex crime policy in America.

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Few crimes evoke greater disgust, anger, and alarm than sex offenses. As a testament to the seriousness of sex crime, a large body of research has been devoted toward understanding its nature and extent, its causes, and public and policy responses to prevent it. The author argues that despite this knowledge base, current discussions and debates about sex crime and the appropriate policies to address it are far too simplistic, and rarely draw on this empirical body of work. That is, they tend to emphasize that all sex offenders are alike—despite the vast heterogeneity within this broad category. Moreover, many prominent efforts to effectively reduce sex crime are underpinned by misperceptions about the reality of sex offending. From her assessment what is needed for a more accurate view of sex offending in America is a critical look at the following: the nature, extent, and causes of sexual offending, societal reactions to sexual deviance, and the various policy responses developed to prevent sex offending. Moving beyond superficial perceptions is a necessary first step toward comprehending the complexity of a most serious and detrimental crime, and importantly, informing our efforts to better address it. Given the book’s emphasis on research and policy, it appeals to a broad audience. Criminology and criminal justice undergraduates and graduates, scholars, and practitioners will find the text’s focus, organization, and analysis particularly helpful for their academic pursuits.

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