

# Sex Crime, Offenders, and Society



# Sex Crime, Offenders, and Society

*A Critical Look at Sexual  
Offending and Policy*

SECOND EDITION

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# Preface

In the first edition of this book, I argued that sex crime policymaking has become a “growth industry,” with a variety of new, mostly punitive reforms, directed at addressing sexual violence. Nearly a decade later, that assessment remains largely unchanged. Almost one million people, no longer incarcerated, are subjected to a variety of “invisible punishments,” sanctions and restrictions that can hamper their reentry into society. The designation of “sex offender” has expanded and changed in recent decades. For example, a wide range of people now 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.

On the one hand, this response can be viewed positively. It signals that sexual violence will not be tolerated. Without question, the issue has, and continues, to unite lawmakers, policymakers, and the general public in a quest to ensure greater accountability of individuals who perpetrate such crime and to develop better prevention efforts to enhance public safety. In the same way that this drive has contributed to well-intentioned, but flawed policies, it can also direct evidence-based laws that better address and prevent a very serious crime that impacts all of society. While many current laws and reforms emphasize “much of the same,” there is some preliminary evidence that restorative processes can exist alongside these punitive reforms, and that the public endorses this new direction toward reintegration. Accomplishing the goal of sex crime prevention requires continued dialogue concerning the full spectrum of complex issues related to sex offending and our responses to reduce it.

Applying a critical lens, the second edition of *Sex Crime, Offenders, and Society: A Critical Look at Sexual Offending and Policy* explores the nature, extent, and causes of sexual offending, societal reactions to sexual deviance, and the numerous policy responses developed to prevent sex crime. 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. Over the last three decades, scholars

have taken on an important mission, researching the nature and extent of sex crime, its causes, and public and policy responses to sex offending. The second edition of this text summarizes and reviews this large knowledge base, incorporating the latest statistics and scholarship. Additionally, it now includes a chapter on an often-discussed arena of sex crime policymaking, that of campus sexual assault prevention.

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, control, and in less prevalent instances, rehabilitate, 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 the relevance of current legal challenges to sex crime legislation in shaping widespread reforms. New to this edition, Chapter 11 examines a “special topic” in sex crime policymaking discussions, that of campus sexual assault prevention. Chapter 12 concludes the text with an emphasis on the future of sex crime policy in America.

# Acknowledgments

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# Introductory Note

In contemporary society, sex crimes sit atop the crime hierarchy, evoking extreme levels of public disgust, anger, and alarm. Attesting to the seriousness of sexual violence, a wide and varied body of research, exploring the nature and extent of sexual violence, its causes, and public and policy responses to prevent it, now exists. 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. Public debates and policy discussions 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. What is needed, and what this text seeks to provide, 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 diverse audiences. Undergraduates and graduates studying crime and victimization, scholars, and practitioners will find the text's focus, organization, and analysis particularly helpful for their academic pursuits.

Christina Mancini is an associate professor and assistant chair of the Criminal Justice Program at Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. She received her doctoral degree from Florida State University's College of Criminology and Criminal Justice in 2009. Dr. Mancini has published over 35 studies in the areas of sexual offending, sex crime policy, violent victimization, public opinion, and criminological theory. These works have appeared in highly ranked journals such as *Criminology*, *Crime & Delinquency*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and other crime and policy journals. She is currently involved in several studies related to sex crime, criminal justice policy, race, offending, and public opinion. Dr. Mancini serves as an editorial advisory board member for several journals, including the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Journal of School Violence*. She is a founding member of the Sexual Offense Policy Research (SOPR) workgroup, an organization dedicated to enhancing public safety through the implementation of evidence-based law and policy (<http://www.soprresearch.org/>). Dr. Mancini's research has been nationally recognized and she is frequently consulted for her scholarly expertise by news and media outlets, most recently, the *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*.

