
THE SEXUAL PREDATOR

LEGAL, ADMINISTRATIVE, ASSESSMENT,
AND TREATMENT CONCERNS

Volume V

Edited by
Anita Schlank, Ph.D.

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Introduction

“More dangerous than hitmen” is how sexual offenders, particularly those who offend against children, have been described by those who simply cannot comprehend their actions (Nhan, Polzer, & Ferguson, 2012, pp. 829–830). Those authors went on to note that judges often hold views similar to the public’s when it comes to sexual offenders. For example, one judge from California explained that in developing laws, terms are carefully used, noting “we purposely use ‘predator’ because it connotes something bad versus ‘offender’” (Nhan et al., 2012, p. 828). Another judge illustrated judicial emotions by quoting a Texas saying: “Many a man that needed killin’, no child that needed a molestin’” (Nhan et al., 2012, p. 829). Sexual abuse is a confusing behavior that is difficult to understand and triggers many strong emotions, even in legal and mental health professionals.

This emotionality can sometimes be in the other direction as well—in defense of the sexual offenders, and can be exacerbated by strong feelings about civil commitment as sexually violent predators (SVPs). For example, one group of defense attorneys hosts a website that asks the question: “Who is the sexual predator—the accused or the lying teen?” and asks, “What is being done to prevent these teens from ruining the life of another man? Nothing. . . .” It adds that “citizens should be open-minded and not be afraid of being labeled as a sex offender supporter simply for standing up to laws that are unfair” (Pavlinoc, 2011). Additionally, on listservs, where debate about commitment evaluations can get quite heated, forensic psychologists who work solely for defense attorneys have been known to make snide swipes at state-hired psychologists, even implying that they are unethical for doing their very difficult and often thankless job.

In fact, however, it is understood that sexual offenses are, if anything, greatly underreported, so there is little cause to worry about “lying teens.” And, research shows that all evaluators need to be more conscientious about the effects of hiring bias, regardless of whether they are hired by defense or prosecutorial attorneys (Murrie, Boccaccini, Guarnera, & Rufino, in press).

Ideally, we should all work together to decrease the emotionality that influences important decisions regarding sexual offenders. As stated by Nancy Sabin, the executive director of the Jacob Wetterling Foundation, “We have to stop pretending that these people are coming from other planets” (Janus, 2006, p. 1). We also need to stop expressing hostility toward those who evaluate and/or treat SVPs. We should strive to offer our support to offenders who had been committed as SVPs but who are now genuinely trying to change their lives and are struggling against obstacles such as stigma and public misinformation. Additionally, we should offer our support to lawyers, judges, and Central Office administrators who struggle with a hybrid program that does not fit cleanly into either the mental health or the correctional world. Finally, we should offer our support to the dedicated mental health professionals who try to conduct the best possible assessments and offer the highest-quality treatment to this highly misunderstood subgroup of criminal offenders. This book series is one small step in an effort to accomplish that goal. The authors in this volume have all proven to be dedicated to maintaining the highest standards possible when it comes to public poli-

cy, assessment, and treatment of those residents civilly committed as SVPs. In addition, they remain dedicated to battling the myths and overemotionality triggered by this topic. I thank them for their hard work in this field and their willingness to share their knowledge with others.

—Anita Schlank

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