

# Criminal careers of juvenile sex offenders



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It is often thought that sex offenders are chronic offenders specialised in sexual offences. In particular, it is assumed that people who start to commit sexual offences at a young age have a sexual or psychological abnormality that causes them to continue sexual offending for a long time. In a certain sense sex offenders are seen as 'incurable'. In recent years, a growing amount of research from both the Netherlands and abroad has been focused on the criminal careers of juvenile sex offenders. The outcomes of these studies are important for making policy and legislation evidence-based, meaning based on the best available information regarding effectiveness and efficiency.

## Recidivism of juvenile sex offenders

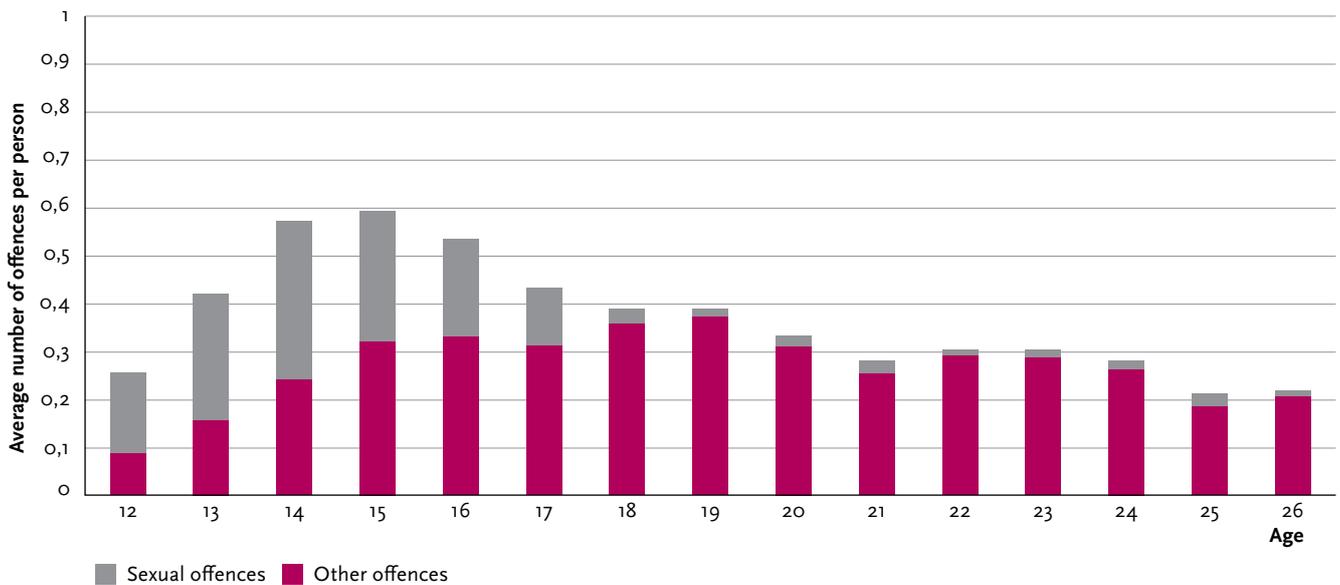
Within a period of 5 years, 7% of the juvenile perpetrators of a serious sexual offence commit a new sexual offence ↗, ↘. When examining a longer period of time, the percentage of offenders who commit a new sexual offence increases, dependent on the type of perpetrator. Researchers found percentages which varied from between 8% for an average group of sex offenders (perpetrators who committed both serious and less serious sexual offences) over a period of 10 years,<sup>1</sup> 12% over a period of 14 years ↗ for a group of offenders who committed serious sexual offences and 13% for an average group of juvenile sex offenders over a period of 35 years ↘. Recently, a Dutch study has revealed that sexual recidivism for an average group of sex offenders was distributed across rape (38%), sexual assault (32%) and sexual abuse (24%); the remaining group committed other sexual offences (6%).<sup>1</sup> Further research has revealed that juvenile sex offenders more often recidivate to non-sexual offences, depending on the type of perpetrator (average sex offenders or perpetrators of serious sexual offences) and how long the criminal career was investigated. Various studies found general reoffending rates of 43% (serious offenders, period of 5 years ↗), 68% (average group, 10 years);<sup>1</sup> 74% (serious offenders, 14 years ↗) and 60% (average group, 35 years).<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in general, juvenile sex offenders were found to be non-specialist perpetrators who recommitted sexual offences significantly less often than other types of offences. However, juvenile sex offenders have a higher chance of sexual reoffending than perpetrators of non-sexual offences ↗.

## Predictors of repeat sexual offences?

The empirical literature has only revealed to a limited extent which factors are predictors for a person recommitting a sexual offence. These factors are: deviant sexual interests; previous sexual offences; sexual offences with several victims; social isolation and a very young age at which the first sexual offence was committed ↗. Juvenile perpetrators of sexual offences aimed at young children do not on average have an increased risk of sexual reoffending compared to juvenile perpetrators who perpetrate sexual offences against their peers.<sup>1</sup> Recently a Dutch study has also demonstrated that repeat sex offenders often committed more sexual offences at a young age than non-repeat sex offenders. Additionally, it is striking that repeat sex offenders are found to also commit many other types of criminal offences as adults.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, juvenile sex offenders who reoffend sexually seem to be active "all-round" perpetrators.

**Average number of sexual offences and other types of offences (property and violence offences, other offences) per person per year. N = 1525 juvenile sexual offenders**



**Decrease in the risk of a repeat sexual offence**

The older juvenile sex offenders become, the lower the chance that they will reoffend with a sexual offence (see number of sexual offences from the age of 18 upwards in figure). If there is a repeat sexual offence, the following sexual offences are mostly committed before the age of 18. This has been demonstrated in both Dutch and foreign research (↗, ↗). British research revealed that 17 years after having committed a sexual offence as a juvenile, the risk of a new sexual offence is just as low as for a group of citizens without a criminal record (↗). As juvenile sex offenders become older, the risk of an ex-offender re-offending by means of a sexual offence therefore decreases further (↗).

**References**

- 1 Berg, C.J.W. van den, Bijleveld, C.C.J.H. & Hendriks, J. (2016). Chapter 9: Juvenile Sex Offenders. *Oxford Handbook of Sexual Offenders and Offending*, to be published.
- 2 Hargreaves (2015). Measuring the long term sexual recidivism risk of convicted sex offenders in England & Wales and Norway. PhD thesis Lancaster University.

**Further reading**

- Berg, C.J.W. van den (2015). *From boys to men: Explaining juvenile sex offenders' criminal careers*. PhD thesis VU University Amsterdam. <http://dare.uvu.vu.nl/handle/1871/53298>.
- Lussier, P. & Blokland, A. (2014). The adolescence-adulthood transition and Robin's continuity paradox: criminal career patterns of juvenile and adult sex offenders in a prospective longitudinal birth cohort study. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(2), 153-163.
- Miner, M. H. (2007). The fallacy of juvenile sex offender risk. *Criminology*, 6(3), 565-572.
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