

## POSTER

### Reaction to Civil Commitment

Elizabeth L. Jeglic Ph.D.  
Cynthia C. Mercado Ph.D.  
Stacey Katz, M.A

In an effort to protect the public from dangerous sex offenders, 19 states, including New Jersey, have enacted "Sexual Predator Statutes" to provide for post sentence civil commitment of sex offenders known as "Sexually Violent Predators" (SVPs). As of May 2006, there were 3646 sex offenders being held in the US under these laws (Deming, 2007). The intended purpose of civil commitment is for the offenders to receive the treatment they need to prevent them from reoffending (Schlank & Cohen, 1999). Each state differs in their application of the legislation, however at some point prior to release, the records of all sex offenders are reviewed to determine which sex offenders are most likely to reoffend. Those who are deemed likely to reoffend then participate in a face-to-face interview and risk assessment with a licensed psychologist and/or psychiatrist. If the psychologist and/or psychiatrist determine that they meet the definition of an SVP, then they are recommended for civil commitment and their cases are brought before the courts at which point a ruling is made. In many cases, the sex offenders are not made explicitly aware of this process and they are surprised to learn that at the completion of their sentence they are not being released, but rather they are being sent to a civil commitment facility (Mann, personal communication).

While several studies have evaluated the impact of SVP legislation on sexual recidivism and community safety, to our knowledge there are currently no studies examining how these policies impact the sex offenders who are civilly committed. Levenson and Cotter (2005) examined the effects of residence restrictions on sex offenders and found that sex offenders reported that they felt an increased sense of isolation, emotional stress and decreased levels of stability as a consequence of these laws. In another study, Jeglic, Mercado and Sahlstrom (2008) found that sex offenders on a state internet registry reported mild to moderate levels of depression and hopelessness. While these studies seem to suggest that there may be some negative psychological sequelae to the sex offenders as a consequence of sex offender legislation, these studies examined legislation that was significantly less restrictive than civil commitment. The current paper will explore sex offenders' reactions to being civilly committed and how that affects the sex offenders and their ability to participate in treatment.

As part of an on-going project, we are gathering data from sex offenders who are being housed at the Special Treatment Unit (STU), the sex offender civil commitment facility in Rahway, New Jersey. Currently there are approximately 380 sex offenders

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who are civilly committed in the facility. All participants complete a Reaction to Civil Commitment Interview which includes questions pertaining to their willingness to participate in treatment, as well as a series of self report questionnaires assessing depression, hopelessness, anxiety, anger and trauma. We are also reviewing their criminal records and treatment records.

Preliminary results suggest that the sex offenders are reporting intense feelings of anger and hopelessness regarding the civil commitment process. Further, the sex offenders are reporting that the process interferes with their ability to participate with treatment initially, although they report with time these feelings dissipate. We anticipate having complete data on 100 civilly committed sex offenders by June 2008. These findings will be discussed as they pertain to sex offender treatment and SVP legislation.