A systematic review of psychological interventions for sexual offenders - II: quasi-experimental and qualitative data

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CRD summary
This review assessed the efficacy of a range of psychological interventions for sexual offenders. The authors concluded that there is little consensus on the effectiveness of different treatment programmes. Insufficient information on the primary studies and poor reporting of some aspects of the review process, including the validity assessment, make the reliability of this conclusion difficult to determine.

Authors' objectives
To assess the quasi-experimental and qualitative research on the effectiveness of psychological treatments for adult sexual offenders.

Searching
MEDLINE, PsycINFO, EMBASE, CINAHL, BIOSIS Previews and C2-SPECTR were searched; the search terms were reported, though search dates were not. References of both included and excluded studies and other relevant articles were checked. A handsearch of high-yield journals was planned, but no such journals were identified. First authors of included studies, and registered professionals and academics involved in sex offender treatment programmes, were contacted in February 2003 for relevant unpublished studies.

Study selection
Studies of participants aged at least 18 years with a conviction or caution for a wide range of illegal sexual behaviours or for offences or violent behaviours with a sexual element, or who had voluntarily sought help for behaviour considered a sexual offence in any jurisdiction, were eligible for inclusion. Studies of individuals convicted or cautioned for homosexuality, transvestism or transexuality were excluded from the review. The overwhelming majority of participants in the included studies were male. Eligible studies were of interventions carried out in criminal justice or mental health care facilities, or in the community. The included studies used cognitive-behavioral programmes, cognitive self-change programmes and covert sensitisation. Comparison groups were given standard care, standard punishment, prison, no treatment or a drug treatment. Controlled trials with either matched or non-matched groups were eligible for inclusion, as were qualitative outcome or process evaluations of interventions, qualitative non-intervention research and studies examining views of treatment experience. For quasi-experimental studies, the outcomes of interest included death, recidivism, global state, behaviour, mental state, engagement with services, adverse effects, prison and service outcomes, satisfaction with treatment, acceptance of treatment, study withdrawals and quality of life. The included studies most commonly reported re-conviction, change in attitudes and risk, re-arrest and completion of treatment.

Two reviewers selected studies for the review in the first instance, then three independent reviewers after examination of the full papers. Any disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Assessment of study quality
Quasi-experimental studies appear to have been assigned to one of three categories of study quality based on an assessment of the study's vulnerability to bias; it is not clear how the criterion of allocation concealment was applied to non-randomised studies. Qualitative studies were assessed using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP).

Three reviewers independently assessed the studies for validity.

Data extraction
It appears that data on outcomes that were sufficient to enable a $\chi^2$ test to be performed were extracted. The authors did
not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction.

**Methods of synthesis**
The studies were combined in separate narrative syntheses for the quasi-experimental and qualitative studies.

**Results of the review**
Twenty-one quasi-experimental studies and four qualitative studies were included in the review.

Seven studies reported that treatment had a statistically significant impact on various measures of offending behaviour ($p<0.05$). Four studies reported insufficient data for a measure of their effectiveness to be obtained, while ten studies reported no statistically significant difference attributable to treatment.

Various aspects of treatment were explored in the qualitative studies.

**Cost information**
The authors sought data on economic outcomes.

**Authors' conclusions**
The authors appear to conclude that there was little consensus on the capabilities of interventions with different theoretical underpinnings in altering either the offenders' behaviour or their attitudes.

**CRD commentary**
The review question and inclusion criteria were clearly defined. The authors searched a number of relevant databases and made reasonable attempts to identify unpublished studies. The authors reported using methods designed to minimise bias and error in the selection of studies for the review and in the assessment of study validity, but not in the extraction of data. A validity assessment was carried out, but it is unclear whether appropriate criteria were employed, and the results of the assessment do not appear to have been used to inform the synthesis. The decision to employ a narrative synthesis was appropriate in view of the considerable clinical and methodological heterogeneity between the studies. The authors' conclusion is an accurate reflection of the results of the review; however, the lack of an appropriately reported validity assessment and a paucity of study details mean that it is impossible to be certain of the conclusion's reliability.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**
Practice: The authors did not state any implications for practice.

Research: The authors stated that large-scale assessments of both outcome and process of treatment are required.

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**Bibliographic details**

**Other publications of related interest**

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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.