



Sexual Predators: Society, Risk, and the Law

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Reviewed by David Prescott, Review Editor

The authors alone are something of a “Who’s Who” of our field, and barely need an introduction. Robert Prentky is Professor of Psychology and Director of Forensic Training at Fairleigh University, as well as having an extensive history in the field of assessing people who have sexually abused, from typological research at the

Massachusetts Treatment Center to the development of the Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol – II. Howard Barbaree is a psychologist and Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, and Vice President of Research and Academics at the Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care in Penetanguishene, Ontario. He is a former Editor of *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, to which he has made many contributions, and has also presented a number of plenary addresses and workshops at ATSA’s conferences over the years. Eric Janus is a Past President and Dean at the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is also an active and well-known critic of [sexual offender civil commitment laws](#). Together, they are perfectly matched to take on the issues addressed in the title.



David Prescott

The title itself may be deceiving – or at least open to interpretation. On one hand, many professionals find the term “sexual predator” to be vague yet emotionally charged and anxiety-provoking, more prejudicial than probative. On the other hand, what is not apparent from the title is that this book focuses primarily on those people who have abused and are at high risk to persist, with a particular emphasis on sexual offender civil commitment. This then, is the reviewer’s chief criticism of the book, and a reminder of the need for precise language in discussing this most important intersection of society, psychology, and the legal system. Because the available scientific evidence continues to show that the majority of people convicted of sex crimes are not officially known to re-offend, it is therefore important to place inflammatory language such as “predator” into a specific context. What goes missing

in lay public discussions of sexual abuse all too often is that behaviors can be separate from habits, which in turn can be separate from interests and arousal patterns. All of these can be separate from diagnosable conditions and levels of risk. This is why so many opt for “person-first language” such as “person who has sexually abused,” even though it can seem cumbersome at first.

Language aside, the material in the book is excellent, and builds on the authors’ previous work in books and scholarly journal articles. Each author has a long history of passion and purpose in reducing the harm of sexual abuse. Each are now at a stage in their career where they can balance saying exactly what they think with methodological rigor that is above reproach. The opening of the book itself provides an excellent example of the provocative nature of the content. The first chapter is titled, *Human dangerousness and the legacy of fear management*, and opens with:

Sexual violence is a national scourge. Indeed, for a country that champions human rights, it is a disgrace. The National Violence Against Women Survey reported that close to one fifth of all women report that they have been the victim of an attempted or completed rape at some point in their lives. More than half of that group reported that the sexual violence had occurred before the age of 18 (p. 1).

As one might imagine, the entire book is as easy to read as it is scholarly. It is clearly intended for a professional audience, but could serve as a graduate-level text in the right hands.

It is worthwhile to mention that the above section opens a chapter on historical responses to frightening behaviors, from the witch hunts of puritan New England, through McCarthyism and the first wave of “sexual psychopath” laws, to the first descriptions of moral panics in 1972, and up to the present. The text is not just interesting, but fascinating and highly relevant – professionals in our field are prone to the same moral panics as the people who came before us, no matter what our level of scientific knowledge.

The authors next address the antecedents to more recent and specific “sexual predator” laws, including sterilization of mentally retarded persons and the internment of Japanese Americans. They go on to describe a classic meta-analysis by Bruce Rind and his colleagues finding that not all who are abused are irrevocably harmed by the experience, but was nonetheless denounced by the US House of Representatives in a vote of 355-0. These findings have since been replicated, including by Susan Clancy in “The Trauma Myth”, reviewed by [Jon Brandt in the summer 2016 edition of this newsletter](#).

From there, the book explores and discusses important areas of interest: the development and evaluation of actuarial risk assessment instruments, the usage of such instruments, and the importance of theory in assessing risk. Most importantly, they also address important considerations in assessing risk under conditions of uncertainty. A final chapter addresses sexual offender policy, law, and management, and includes sections on the importance of assessing the effectiveness of interventions as a matter of policy.

Although it may seem cliché, this book truly belongs on the shelves and desks of all involved in decision-making about treatment and policy decisions regarding people who have sexually abused, especially those involved in high-stakes and controversial endeavors such as civil commitment. The authors are among the most knowledgeable in the world, and committed to the highest scientific principles. Therefore, their opinions come from experience and are not in service of systems that make up the status quo.