INTRODUCTION

The sexual assault of women and children represents a very serious problem in North American society. It is a frequent occurrence, and the effects on its victims are severe and long lasting. While such offenses have been acknowledged for many years, the emergence of the feminist movement forced an awakening of interest in the problem, and finally the full extent of these crimes has been appreciated. Increased public awareness has stimulated discussion of the steps we might take as a society to prevent these crimes. Until recently, the criminal justice system, which has control of apprehending, charging, convicting, and punishing a small minority of offenders, was society’s only response to the crime. Even now, although more rational and innovative approaches have been suggested and tried, we cannot say that we have taken more than the initial steps toward adequately addressing the problem. This book is a description of some of those initial steps.

It is generally recognized that progress toward dealing with sexual assault must proceed along three fronts: (1) prevention, (2) treatment of victims, and (3) evaluation and treatment of the perpetrators. The content of this book is confined to the latter, but our choice in setting this boundary does not imply a belief that treatment of the offender is the most important. All three aspects of the approach to the problem are crucial and, indeed, we believe that research in each area contributes significantly to the others as well as to the attempt to achieve an overall reduction in sexual offenses. Our choice in focusing on the assessment and treatment of offenders derives primarily from an appreciation of our own areas of expertise and, not least, our own limits. The research and clinical experience of each of us is restricted to work with offenders, and the same is true of most, but not all, of our contributors.

W. L. Marshall • Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6, Canada. D. R. Laws • Department of Law and Mental Health, Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33612-3899. H. E. Barbaree • Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6, Canada.
Scope of the Work

As the book will reveal, the knowledge and understanding of sexual offenders currently available is quite limited; the information presented here represents only the beginning of systematic research. What we do know, however, stands as a solid foundation for future research. Some of these issues and their limitations are considered in the following pages.

Origins of Sexual Assault

An explanation of sexual assault remains obscure, although the often neglected but rather obvious fact that almost all apprehended offenders are male should provide a focus for investigation. In attempting to provide a perspective on the nature of these men, some writers have focused on biological predispositions, others have limited their consideration to conditioning and social learning experiences, and still others have examined the sociocultural contexts in which the offenses occur. While some authors have considered etiology, others have turned their attention to the factors which maintain assaultive tendencies once they have become well established. These various points of view attest to the diversity of factors which play a part in the etiology and maintenance of sexually assaultive behavior. In the theory section of this book we have tried to represent these diverse approaches to understanding sexual abuse.

Factors Influencing Sexual Assault

Factors influencing sexual assault include a mixture of etiological and maintaining processes. Our goal was to have our authors examine the functional relationship between apparent motives or observed deficiencies in sexual offenders and their actual offensive behavior. Accordingly, these chapters have reviewed a large body of empirical literature which documents the biological, behavioral, cognitive, and historical features that distinguish sexual offenders from nonoffenders.

These chapters also make clear that some factors which do not necessarily distinguish offenders from others may have a strong influence on sexual assault. To take a single example, many sexual offenders drink alcohol to excess, but in this they do not differ from many nonoffenders. This observation, however, does not alter the obvious fact that alcohol abuse is clearly implicated in sexual offending. We are primarily interested in the functional link between relevant factors and the commission of sexual offenses, irrespective of whether or not sexual offenders as a group differ on particular factors from other groups of men.

The Cognition Gap

While it is evident from the extensive body of research considered here that we have made important progress in the past 15 years, it is equally evident that we have a long way to go. This deficit is particularly evident when it comes to understanding the cognitive processes that sex offenders exhibit. It is widely