

# Re-Thinking Our Approach to Adolescents



## MASOC

Promoting safety through interventions  
for youth with sexually problematic and  
abusive behaviors.

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**Considering Age-Appropriate Responses to  
Problematic Adolescent Sexual Behavior in Massachusetts**

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## Re-Thinking Our Approach To Adolescents

Thanks to the courage of victims and survivors of sexual abuse over several decades, the issue of sexual violence has garnered the public's attention. More recently, there has been a growing public policy response that has focused on stopping sexual violence. Unfortunately, these policy initiatives are often generated as a response to a particularly heinous or disturbing offense and are therefore frequently driven less by the facts and known research and more by the emotional dynamics of the very worst cases. As a prevention and treatment community, we want to ensure that we focus our resources on the most dangerous adult sex offenders and the small percentage of highly concerning adolescents. However, as both the federal government and individual states have crafted interventions and public policies to address violent and predatory adults, more and more adolescents are prosecuted for sexual offenses and are being swept up in a "one size fits all" approach.

### Adolescents re Not Little Adults

Sadly, this "one size fits all" approach fails to recognize the fundamental developmental differences between adults and adolescents that have guided our criminal justice responses for several decades. It also fails to acknowledge and integrate the volume of scientific research that clearly delineates the neurological, social, and environmental factors that influence adolescent behavior in a manner that is notably different from adults.

Current research indicates that only a small percentage of adolescents who are apprehended for a sexual crime will go on to re-offend sexually (7-16%) and especially so when the adolescent is given quality treatment. Research has also shown that an adolescent's capacity for sound judgment, emotional and behavioral control, appraisal of risk, and the accurate assessment of the consequences of their actions

are all impacted by the variabilities of their still developing brains. With specific regard to adolescents who engage in problematic or abusive sexual behavior, research has demonstrated a wide range of factors in an adolescent's life affects both their amenability to treatment and their risk to re-offend.

***We would argue that these differences should be considered when developing policies that address the problem of sexual violence, and they should serve as the foundation for creating systemic responses and interventions that are demonstrably different for adolescents and adults in the vast majority of cases.***



## Current Policy Justifications Do Not Apply to Most Youth

When broad public policy is written to address the problem of predatory sexual violence by adults, rarely is it done with a focus on the impact it may have on the growing number of adolescents charged with a sexual offense. Most state statutes focusing on sexual violence are not informed by an understanding of adolescent sexual abuse research or written from a perspective that takes into account what is known about adolescent development. All adolescents must be held accountable for the crimes they commit. And society's response must also offer an individualized developmentally and culturally appropriate approach that facilitates the adolescent's ability to live safely and productively when he or she returns to their family and community.

Large scale studies have shown that adolescents charged with sexual offenses range from the seriously assaultive to the uninformed and impulsive. The adolescents themselves fall on a broad spectrum that can include an isolated and neglected 14 year-old; a previously abused 15 year-old female babysitter; a cognitively limited 16 year-old; and a persistently delinquent 17 year-old. The management and treatment of each of these adolescents should be tailored to the development of that adolescent which will be markedly different from approaches that address the behavior of a sexually abusive adult. Research does show that the large majority of all youth will be able to live safely in the community. Their chances of growing into healthy safe adulthood are improved by time-limited, focused interventions, victim empathy education, involvement in some form of restitution, and consistent adult support and mentoring.



## Recognizing Youth Are Different From Adults

In almost all other areas of social policy, we recognize that adolescents can be impulsive, use poor judgment, and make uninformed choices. We find ways to hold them accountable for their actions and offer them the opportunity to learn and grow from these mistakes by developing the skills and attributes necessary to make better decisions and live healthy lives. It is equally important to offer children and adolescents who have acted out sexually a chance to learn about the impact of what they have done and positively change their behavior. These differences between adults and adolescents have been recently acknowledged by the Department of Justice SMART Office with new regulations that would allow for states who come into compliance with the Adam Walsh Act (SORNA) to create policies for adolescents that are distinct from adult sex offender policies.

## Time To Re-Think Our Policy So Everyone Is Safe

It is time to re-think our approach to adolescents who commit abusive sexual acts. We want to ensure that we focus our resources on the most dangerous adult offenders and the small percentage of highly concerning adolescents. However, we also want to find better ways to manage, treat and hold accountable the vast number of other adolescents who can learn to live healthy and safely in our communities. We have the knowledge now to make careful decisions that will protect the community and allow the developmental, cultural and emotional realities of adolescence to be considered. We can end "the one size fits all" misconception that adolescents are just a slightly younger version of adults. We can amend existing policies so they offer different solutions to these two distinct populations; we can ensure that adolescents are guaranteed treatment for any crimes they commit or for behaviors that put them at high risk to offend; and we can provide support to families who are involved, loving, and able to hold adolescents accountable for their future behaviors.



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