

# Introduction to Statistical Thinking

**S**ex offenders are often viewed as the most prolific and active criminals in American society. They are considered sexual predators with an uncontrollable sexual compulsion that leads to persistent and specialized forms of sex offending.

A recent study of about 10,000 sex offenders released from U.S. prisons, however, questions this conventional wisdom about them. In fact, the authors of this study (Miethe, Olson, and Mitchell 2006) found that sex offenders have an average of about 7 different arrests over their entire criminal "career," but most of them (61%) had only 1 arrest for sex offenses. Burglars, in contrast, averaged 13 arrests, and most of them (56%) had more than 1 burglary arrest in their criminal history. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that sex offenders are neither specialist nor persistent offenders when compared to other criminals.

As a public consumer of this type of information, what do think about the results of this study? Do they make sense to you? Is there some major flaw in this study that severely undermines its basic conclusions? Are community notification laws going to protect the public from sexual predators when the typical sex offender in this study seems to desist in sexual offending once he is arrested the first time for these offenses?

**A**ccording to national police data (FBI 2004), the average "take" from a street robbery or mugging is \$898. Most people will logically conclude from this statistic that the typical U.S. mugger gets about \$900 per incident.

Unfortunately, any inference about the typical behavior of muggers from police data is fundamentally flawed in several ways: