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Sexual offenders tend to be viewed as the most objectionable type of criminal offender and are assumed by many to be untreatable and more likely to recidivate (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). Because of that view, many laws have been developed specifically for this subgroup of offenders. For example, in Jacksonville, Florida, officials approved legislation requiring sexual offenders who seek emergency shelter during a hurricane to notify shelter operators of their sex crime history, and sheriffs in another county in Florida proposed passing legislation that would ban them from public hurricane shelters altogether, forcing them to be evacuated to a separate shelter (Associated Press, 2005).

Special laws providing for the civil commitment of sexual offenders following the termination of their prison sentences are currently enacted in seventeen states and the District of Columbia. Like other laws which are aimed at monitoring and controlling sexual offenders, the passing of these statutes was precipitated by several high-profile horrendous crimes. However, these statutes, of all the sex offender-related laws, appear to stir the most controversy. Those in favor of the statutes argue that it will incapacitate the most dangerous sexual offenders until they can be successfully treated and returned to the community when they present a much lower risk. They point to recent crimes that are believed to be committed by released sexual offenders, such as the case of Dru Sjodin, who was kidnapped from a mall parking lot in South Dakota and murdered (Associated Press, 2003) and the kidnapping and murder of Jessica Lunsford in Florida (Associated Press, 2005), as the evidence of the need for such statutes. Others argue that the laws are unconstitutional, that there is no accurate method for identifying those most likely to offend, and that there are more economical ways to prevent sexual offenders from reoffending.

The emotion surrounding these arguments can be quite intense. For example, one author (Sarker, 2003) noted that the sexually violent predator (SVP) laws are similar to serial slasher movies in that both tend to shock, test human rationality to the limit, have incredible twists and turns, and get worse with each sequel. Janus (2004) compared the passing of these statutes to the opening of Pandora’s Box, noting that they initially seemed attractive but now seem excessive. And, the New York Civil Liberties Union (n.d.) indicates that, in its opinion, identifying people who have a disorder that makes it more likely to commit a crime is dangerous, adding, “Who is next?” People with a family history of alcoholism and a driver’s license?

Other authors (including myself) believe that despite the continuing controversy about their existence, it is unlikely that these statutes will disappear. Therefore, it may be that the more useful focus will be on ensuring that evaluators do the most accurate job possible in identifying the subgroup that presents the highest risk to society, and assisting treatment providers to identify the most effective methods for treating this very difficult population.

These varying views can all be found among the collective authors in The Sexual Predator series. Not everyone will agree with the viewpoints outlined in the chapters. However, it is just this variety of opinions that provides a crucial balance to the overall picture of this highly complex issue.
I am grateful to the authors for their excellent contributions to this volume. I believe that this book will be useful for psychologists involved in the evaluation of sexual offenders for possible civil commitment, attorneys either defending or prosecuting such cases, treatment providers in those states that have or are considering such statutes, and those individuals who are addressing related public policy issues.

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