

A Profile of the Adolescent Sex Offender

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It has been estimated that adolescent sex offenders account for more than a third of all sexual assaults³. It has also been found that half of convicted adult offenders committed their first sexual offence as an adolescent⁴ and that one of the best predictors of adult sex offending is an early onset of sexual offending⁵. Therefore, knowledge about the characteristics of the adolescent sex offender may be useful in identifying etiological variables associated with sexual offending and in developing intervention. This paper provides a brief overview of some of the most commonly cited characteristics of the adolescent sex offender.

History of abuse

Many adolescent sex offenders report that their first sexual experience was abusive. For example, when Longo⁶ assessed 17 adolescent sex offenders, 13 reported that their first sexual experience occurred before the age of 12 and a majority of these adolescents had been sexually molested during their childhood.

The relationship between abuse and subsequent violent and/or sexual offending has been studied extensively, although its role in subsequent sexual offending remains controversial. The reported percentages of adolescent sex offenders who have been physically or sexually abused ranges from less than 20%⁷ to more than 50%.⁸ However, some researchers⁹ have failed to find higher sexual victimization among adolescent sex offenders compared with adolescent non-sex offenders.

Although a history of abuse has not been found to be predictive of sexual offending, its prevalence among adolescent sex offenders suggests that this issue cannot be ignored. Researchers¹⁰ have concluded that the link between sexual victimization and subsequent offending needs to be clarified.

Social skills and peer relationships

It has been speculated that inappropriate sexual behaviour stems from deficits in social skills. Numerous researchers¹¹ have found that adolescent sex offenders have social skill deficits, tend to be loners and are socially isolated. When Schram and colleagues assessed the social skills of adolescent sex offenders, they found that more than half were loners and isolated from their peers. In addition, more than two thirds of the offenders had deficits in social skills, while about half had deficits in education, self-awareness and sexual knowledge. This was also found to be true when adolescent sex offenders were compared with other violent adolescent offenders.

Fagan and Wexler¹² found that adolescent sex offenders were more socially and sexually isolated than other violent adolescent offenders. Researchers have also suggested that there may be a relationship between specific social skill deficits and sex offender type, that is, child molester or rapist. Chewing¹³ found that male adolescent child molesters were less likely to have intimate relationships and had fewer female friends than other males, both delinquent and non-delinquent. Similarly, Deisher and colleagues¹⁴ found that adolescent child molesters demonstrated poor social skills, were socially isolated from their peers and had low self-esteem.

More recently, Ford and Linney¹⁵ examined the social skills and interpersonal relationships of four groups of adolescent offenders: rapists, child molesters, violent non-sex offenders and non-violent offenders. They found no differences in their perceived ability to establish peer relationships. However, examination of overt and desired behaviour from others in interpersonal situations found that child molesters showed greater preference for initiating inclusion behaviour rather than receiving it, and reported the greatest desire to control interpersonal situations by giving orders or dominating others.

There appears to be support for the notion that specific social skill deficits are related to specific types of offending. Awad and Saunders found that assaulters were less likely to be socially isolated than a comparison group of child molesters and had older peers compared with other delinquents, while child molesters were found to be chronically isolated from same-age peers.

Substance abuse

The relationship between substance abuse and violent offending has been extensively studied at the adult level.¹⁶ This issue has also been explored with adolescents. For example, Schram and colleagues found that more than one third of their adolescent sex offenders had or were suspected of having a substance abuse problem. However, only 14% were thought to be under the influence at the time of the offence. More recently, Hsu and Starzynski¹⁷ found that just over half of the adolescent rapists in their sample reported using alcohol or drugs before the assault. Less than one quarter of the adolescent child molesters, however, reported using either substance. Their results suggest that alcohol may play a stronger role in rape than child molestation.

Becker and Stein questioned adolescent sex offenders about the perceived impact of alcohol on their sexual arousal. Of those who admitted to consumption of alcohol, only 11% said it increased their arousal while the rest stated that it had no effect. Offenders who reported that alcohol increased their arousal had more victims than those who claimed alcohol did not affect their arousal.

Reviews of this literature suggest there is a link between substance abuse and adolescent sexual offending, although the link is weaker than that observed for adults. It also appears that substance abuse plays a more important role in the case of rape than child molestation.

History of sexual offending

One of the best predictors of sexual offending is a history of previous sexual offending. Therefore, examination of an adolescent's criminal behaviour is an essential variable to examine. Fehrenbach and colleagues found that 58% of the adolescent sex offenders in their sample were involved in at least one sexual offence before their index sex offence, while other researchers have found that less than 10% of the adolescent sex offenders had a prior sexual offence. Schram and colleagues, however, found that nearly a third studied at least one which there of the offenders they studied reported committing at least one other sex crime for which there was no conviction. Overall, the percentage of adolescent sex offenders with a previous sexual offence conviction is quite low. Some evidence points to a greater level of non-reported sexual offending behaviour, however; the nature and severity of these behaviours needs to be examined further.

Family attributes

Familial relationships contribute to people's perception of the world and the people around them. Familial relationships and attributes have been extensively studied in the adolescent sex offender literature.¹⁸ Studies examining the familial attributes of adolescent sex offenders are controversial, with some researchers¹⁹ finding no difference in family functioning between adolescent sex offenders and other delinquents, and others finding significant differences in family functioning.

Hsu and Starzynski examined the family histories of 15 adolescent rapists and 17 adolescent child molesters. They found that the families in both groups were extremely disturbed and that the two groups were not significantly different in the level of family functioning. However, Saunders and Watt²⁰ reported that rapists came from more disturbed backgrounds, characterized by long-term parent-child separations, while child molesters came more often from family backgrounds where there was a high incidence of familial violence, poor bonding and disorganization.

A history of victimization in one or more family members of the adolescent sex offender has been reported in a number of studies. Becker and colleagues²¹ found that mothers of incest offenders were more likely to report their own early victimization, later sexual dysfunction and psychotherapy experience than mothers of non-incest offenders. Similarly, Hsu and Starzynski found that approximately 10% of the mothers reported a history of sexual abuse.

Schram and colleagues found that more than 40% of the offenders reported that a sibling had been sexually abused. Similarly, Kahn and Chambers found that just over a third of the siblings of the offenders they studied were sexually abused by someone other than the offender.

Intrafamilial violence is commonly reported. Fagan and Wexler found that parental violence and violence toward the children was more common in families of adolescent sex offenders than other violent offenders. Other researchers found that approximately half of the adolescent sex offenders had been subjected to or had witnessed intrafamilial violence.

Another consistent finding in the literature is that most adolescent sex offenders come from single-parent homes or have been separated from their parents. Becker and colleagues found that only a third of the offenders were living with both parents, one third were residing with their mother, and the rest were living with someone else other than their parents (e.g., foster home, detention centre, group home or grandparents' home). Graves and colleagues employed meta-analytic techniques on articles published in the last 20 years to provide demographic and parental characteristics of adolescent sex offenders. They found that more than three quarters of the sexual assaulters and less than half of the child molesters and mixed offenders came from single-parent homes. In addition, more than half of the pedophiles reported living in foster homes.

A history of parental substance abuse has also been associated with adolescent sex offenders. Hsu and Starzynski found that half of the offenders had at least one alcoholic parent. The maternal alcohol abuse rate for pedophiles and mixed offenders was about 40% while the rate for assaulters was less than 20%. In contrast, there was little variability in the overall paternal alcohol abuse rate, which exceeded 50%. It was also found that 62% of the fathers and 43% of the mothers used illicit drugs or abused legal drugs.

Ford and Linney found that more than half of the offenders had no familial criminal history. However, Smith²² found that more serious sex offences were committed by adolescents who had another sex offender in the extended family.

In summary, the families of adolescent sex offenders can be described as disturbed, with a high rate of violence (both physical and sexual) and substance abuse. In addition, most adolescent sex offenders come from single-parent homes or have been separated from their parents.

Exposure to information about sex

The type of medium used to learn about sex often reflects the nature of people's attitudes toward sex. This issue has been explored with adolescents. Becker, Cunningham-Rathner and Kaplan²³ asked the adolescent sex offenders about their primary source of information on sexuality. A quarter reported that they had learned about sex in school, three-fifths learned from personal experience, their peers or family members, and the rest learned from the mass media or other sources. Ford and Linney found that more than 40% of the sex offenders had been exposed to hard core sex magazines while less than 30% of non-sex offenders had been. Sex offenders were also exposed to pornographic material at a younger age. Child molesters were exposed to pornography most frequently.

Becker and Stein found that nearly 90% of the offenders had used sexually explicit material and three quarters of these offenders reported that the material increased their arousal. The most frequently cited source of sexually explicit materials was magazines, followed by videotapes, television and books.

Reviews of this literature indicate that adolescent sex offenders have been exposed to more pornography and exposed at a younger age than any other adolescent group. It also appears that child molesters are exposed to pornography more frequently than rapists.

Conclusions and recommendations

These efforts to identify the characteristics of adolescents who engage in inappropriate or illegal sexual activity are important in the context of the risk/needs model of judicial interventions, which assumes that interventions are most effective when they are directed toward the specific needs of the individual.²⁴ Although some variables identified in the research are static (e.g., history of offending), others, such as social skill deficits, substance abuse and dysfunctional parenting, are amenable to change and, if changed, may reduce the likelihood of offending. This has important implications for primary, secondary and tertiary strategies for dealing with adolescent sexual abuse. This paper represents an important beginning in the understanding of sexual abuse by adolescents, but many areas require additional attention. First, individual studies have used only a limited range of variables. Numerous researchers²⁵ have presented theoretical analyses of the causes and correlates of serious criminal behavior in children and adolescents, while others²⁶ have reviewed recent research on the issue. These efforts show that youthful criminal activity is the product of many interacting factors, and this should be recognized in future research on sexual offending. Second, current research does not deal adequately with the issue of causality. Designs permitting the testing of causal hypotheses should be considered. Finally, further research is needed on the efficacy of interventions for the adolescent sex offender and those at risk for such behaviour.

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