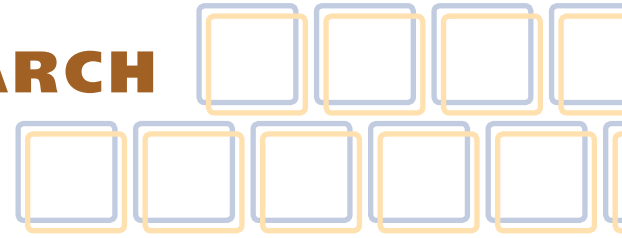




SOMAPI RESEARCH BRIEF

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

Luis C.deBaca, Director • July 2015



Etiology and Typologies of Juveniles Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses

by Tom Leversee

Introduction

This Research Brief addresses the causes and origins of juvenile sexual offending and the pathways related to the development, onset, and maintenance of sexually abusive behavior in this population. It also addresses classification schemes or typologies for juveniles who commit sexual offenses based on types or categories of offenders or victims, and offense characteristics. Knowledge about the etiology of sexual offending is important because it provides both conceptual frameworks and specific guidance that can be used to develop more effective prevention efforts across a broad continuum, from primary to tertiary.¹ Empirically based typologies provide important information for clinical intervention by identifying key constructs for assessment, possible etiological factors specific to each subtype or typology of juveniles, and unique risks and needs for each subtype that should be targeted in treatment (Faniiff & Kolko, 2012). Simply put, the information gained from etiology and typology research provides the foundation for designing and implementing more effective and efficient treatment programming and supervision protocols that reflect individualized risks and needs.

Summary of Research Findings on Etiology

The research on etiological factors for sexual offending includes studies that focus on single factors and those that focus on multiple factors. There appears to be a consensus in the field that etiological factors typically both co-vary and

About SOMAPI

In 2011, the SMART Office began work on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management. As part of the effort, the SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and develop summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. These summaries are available online at <http://smart.gov/SOMAPI/index.html>.

A national inventory of sex offender management professionals also was conducted in 2011 to gain insight about promising practices and pressing needs in the field. Finally, a Discussion Forum involving national experts was held in 2012 for the purpose of reviewing the research summaries and inventory results and refining what is currently known about sex offender management.

Based on the work carried out under SOMAPI, the SMART Office has published a series of Research Briefs, each focusing on a topic covered in the sexual offending and sex offender management literature review. Each brief is designed to get key findings from the literature review into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Overall, the briefs are intended to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for sexual offenders and provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization.



interact with each other in the development and onset of sexual offending and nonsexual delinquency.

Sexual Victimization

Strong evidence indicates that sexual victimization plays a disproportionate role in the development of sexually abusive behavior in adolescents. A number of studies have described a direct path from sexual victimization to sexually abusive behavior, and others have described an indirect path that is mediated by personality variables. For example, Veniziano, Veniziano, and LeGrand (2000) found that sexual offending of some adolescents represents a reenactment of their own sexual victimization or a reactive conditioned and/or learned behavior pattern. The results of their study supported the hypothesis that the juveniles who had been sexually victimized were more likely to select sexual behaviors that were reflective of their own sexual victimization with regard to age and gender of the victim and the types of sexual behaviors perpetrated against the victims. Grabell and Knight (2009) examined child sexual abuse patterns and sensitive periods in the lives of juveniles who had committed sexual offenses. They found that ages 3–7 may be a sensitive period during which sexual abuse can do the most damage and place a youth at higher risk for engaging in sexually abusive behavior later in life. Grabell and Knight concluded that both the age of the victim and the length of the sexual abuse contribute to attitudes and behaviors in juveniles who commit sexual offenses.

Relationship Between Sexual Victimization and Personality Variables

Overall, the empirical evidence supports the notion that sexual abuse should not be examined in isolation, as it clearly co-varies with other developmental risk factors, including personality variables. Hunter and Figueredo (2000), for example, found that a younger age at the time of sexual victimization, a greater number of incidents, a longer period of waiting to report the abuse, and a lower level of perceived family support after revelation of the abuse were found to be predictive of subsequent sexual perpetration. Burton (2008) found that adolescent sexual abusers tend to have higher rates of sexual victimization than nonsexually abusive youth, and that sexually abusive youth who had been sexually victimized themselves were likely to repeat what was done to them in terms of the relationship with and gender of their victim(s), the modus operandi, and the

sexual behaviors. These results suggest that sexually abusive youth may have learned to be sexually abusive from their own sexual perpetrator(s). The personality traits that contributed significantly to the social learning model were “submissive” and “forceful.”

Multiple Types of Child Maltreatment

Numerous studies have found that multiple types of child maltreatment may interact to influence sexually abusive behavior in juveniles. Cavanaugh, Pimenthal, and Prentky (2008), for example, studied a sample of 667 boys and 155 girls involved with social services, the vast majority of whom had engaged in hands-on sexualized behaviors. Almost all of the youth came from “highly dysfunctional” families and had experienced a high degree of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse as well as neglect. The researchers found that 66.7 percent of the study subjects had attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, 55.6 percent had posttraumatic stress disorder, and 49.9 percent had a mood disorder. Approximately one-quarter used drugs and about one-fifth consumed alcohol. These findings highlight the importance of assessing and treating co-occurring issues, which can often be influential in sexual offending behaviors.

Seto and Lalumière (2010) tested special and general explanations of male adolescent sexual offending by conducting a meta-analysis of 59 independent studies comparing male adolescents who committed sexual offenses with male adolescents who committed nonsexual offenses ($N = 13,393$). The results did not support the notion that adolescent sexual offending can be parsimoniously explained as a simple manifestation of general antisocial tendencies. Special explanations for adolescent sexual offending suggested a role for sexual abuse history, exposure to sexual violence, other abuse or neglect, social isolation, early exposure to sex or pornography, atypical sexual interests, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Leibowitz, Burton, and Howard (2012) found that delinquent youth in general had fewer behavioral and developmental problems than victimized and nonvictimized juveniles who committed sexual offenses.

Relationship Between Multiple Types of Child Maltreatment and Personality Variables

Several studies have also documented the relationship between multiple types of child maltreatment and



personality variables. Knight and Sims-Knight (2004) studied 218 juveniles who were adjudicated for sexual offenses and found that early traumatic physical and sexual abuse play an important etiological role, increasing the likelihood of sexually abusive behavior either directly by themselves or indirectly through three intervening paths. The paths predicted sexual coercion of women among juveniles who have committed sexual offenses and who are characterized by three latent personality traits: sexual drive/preoccupation, antisocial behavior/impulsivity, and callous/unemotional trait. The researchers assert that these traits play a critical role across the life span, are critical in assessing the risk of recidivism, and should be targets of treatment.

Daversa and Knight (2007) focused on an etiological model for sexual offending behavior toward younger victims. Their research provides evidence that various developmental and early childhood maltreatment experiences and specific, mediating personality traits contribute significantly to predicting adolescent sexual offending against younger victims. Four significant paths emerged in the model (Daversa & Knight, 2007):

1. From emotional and physical abuse, through psychopathy and sexual fantasy, to child fantasy and child victimization.
2. From emotional and physical abuse; through sexual inadequacy, sexual fantasy, and child fantasy; to child victimization.
3. From emotional and physical abuse, through sexual inadequacy, to child fantasy and child victimization.
4. From sexual abuse directly to child victimization.

Pornography

Although studies have found that pornography use by adult males at risk for aggression may result in sexually aggressive behavior, very little research has been reported on exposure to pornography on the part of juveniles who commit sexual abuse. Burton, Leibowitz, and Howard (2010) compared pornography exposure between male adolescents who sexually abuse and male nonsexual offending delinquent youth. They found that juveniles who had engaged in sexually abusive behavior reported more exposure to pornography when they were both younger and older than age 10 than nonsexual abusers. However, their exposure did not correlate with the age at which their sexually abusive behavior started, the reported number of victims, nor the severity

of the sexual offense. The researchers characterized this study as exploratory in nature and stated that no clear conclusions can be drawn regarding prohibitions or control of pornography for adolescents who sexually abuse and who are in treatment or on parole or probation.

Typologies

Typology research undertaken to date has primarily differentiated subtypes of juveniles who have committed sexual offenses based on victim age, delinquent history, and personality characteristics. This section focuses on research as it relates to these dimensions.

Subtypes Based on Victim Age

Research conducted by Hunter, Hazelwood, and Slesinger (2000) suggests that a meaningful differentiation can be made between youth who sexually offend against younger children (5 or more years younger) and those who target peers and adults. They found that adolescents who targeted peers and adults have greater antisocial tendencies and are more prone to violence in the commission of their sexual offenses than are adolescents who molest children. In a followup study, Hunter and colleagues (2003) contrasted adolescent males who committed sexual offenses against prepubescent children with those who targeted pubescent and postpubescent females. Juveniles who targeted prepubescent children had greater deficits in psychosocial functioning, used less aggression in their sexual offending, and were more likely to offend against relatives. Knight and Sims-Knight (2004) also found that juvenile rapists committed more violent offenses than offenders who victimized younger children and that they evidenced a higher frequency of borderline intellectual functioning. Findings by Daversa and Knight (2007, pp. 1326–1327), however, suggest that a subgroup of adolescent child molesters may be impulsive and aggressive in their offense planning, entertain sadistic fantasies, and demonstrate a high degree of sexual arousal toward young children.

Kemper and Kistner (2010) examined the relationship between victim-age-based subgroup membership and personal, criminal history, and offense history variables. Few associations were found between subgroup membership and measures of physical abuse, social skills, or impulsivity. Kemper and Kistner also argued that victim age is more likely a proxy for other pertinent



factors associated with sexual offending, including the physical and emotional development of the victim. They proposed that when information related to the victim is used in classification, the combination method of using both victim age and offender-victim age discrepancy is preferable. Similarly, Faniiff and Kolko (2012) concluded that it is not clear that the selection of a particular type of victim is indicative of unique risks and needs, suggesting that subtyping based on criminal history or personality measures may prove more meaningful.

Subtypes Based on Delinquent History

Butler and Seto (2002) studied differences between adolescents who sexually offend who had only been charged with sex offenses and those who had ever been charged with a nonsexual offense as well. They found that those who committed only sexual offenses had significantly fewer childhood conduct problems, better current adjustment, more prosocial attitudes, and a lower risk for future delinquency than did the adolescents who committed nonsexual offenses. Butler and Seto concluded that adolescents who had committed sexual and nonsexual offenses are at a higher risk of general reoffending than are sex-offense-only adolescents and are more likely to benefit from treatment targeting general delinquency factors. Zakireh, Ronis, and Knight (2008) found that juveniles who have committed sexual offenses may share a number of common difficulties with general delinquents because many of these youth have similar patterns of criminal offending. Thus, sexual offending may be part of a broader pattern of serious antisocial behavior for a portion of the population of sexually offending juveniles. Miner and colleagues (2010) also found that youth who assault peers or adults are not substantially different from other delinquent youth on most of the measures.

Subtypes Based on Victim Age and Delinquent History

Research conducted by Aebi and colleagues (2012) tested the validity of typing sexually abusive juveniles based on victim age, co-offender status, and crime history. Although some evidence was found for a typology that differentiates juveniles who offend against children from those who offend against adolescents and adults, the researchers suggest that—given the limited

validity and lack of independence found for the three types of sexually abusive juveniles they examined—a comprehensive typology based on victim age and delinquent history is not feasible.

Subtypes Based on Victim Age and Personality Characteristics

Several studies have found that personality differences exist between adolescents who sexually offend against their peers and those who offend against younger children. Carpenter, Peed, and Eastman (1995), for example, found that adolescents who molested children are more schizoid, avoidant, and dependent than adolescents who offended against peers. They also frequently demonstrated a pattern of withdrawing from social encounters with peers and, as such, they commonly experienced loneliness and isolation. In discussing these findings, Carpenter and his colleagues (1995, p. 196) stated that these results “may help explain why adolescent sexual offenders against children gravitate to their victims.” Worling (2001) studied 112 males ages 12–19 who committed sexual offenses and found four personality-based subtypes: antisocial/impulsive youth, unusual/isolated youth, overcontrolled/reserved youth, and confident/aggressive youth. Significant differences were observed between the groups with regard to history of physical abuse, parental marital status, residence of the juveniles, and whether they received criminal charges for their index sexual assaults; however, membership in the subgroups was unrelated to victim characteristics. The juveniles in the two most pathological groups—antisocial/impulsive and unusual/isolated—were most likely to be charged with a subsequent violent (sexual or nonsexual) or nonviolent offense. Twice as many juveniles in the antisocial/impulsive group had a history of physical victimization compared with the other groups in the study. Worling asserted that his study results provided evidence for heterogeneity in the presence and nature of psychopathology, personality characteristics, and social functioning in adolescents who commit sexual offenses—as well as showing different etiological pathways and treatment needs. Finally, research conducted by Richardson and colleagues (2004) provides evidence of heterogeneity in both personality characteristics and psychopathology of adolescents who sexually abuse.



Conclusions and Policy Implications

Although etiological and typological research focused on juveniles who sexually offend has produced mixed and far from definitive findings, it has provided important insights regarding the pathways to sexual offending, typological characteristics, and associated treatment targets. First and foremost, research has consistently demonstrated that juveniles who have committed sexual offenses are a heterogeneous population in terms of etiological pathways, offending patterns, delinquent history, personality characteristics and clinical presentation, and risk for sexual and nonsexual recidivism. The integration of findings from etiological and typological studies suggests differential risks and of treatment and supervision needs.

Empirical evidence concerning the prevalence of child maltreatment in early development offers support for continuing treatment of sexually abusive youth aimed at victimization and trauma resolution. Developmental models, which have included early childhood experiences and family functioning, should be broadened to include larger social variables such as exposure to sexually violent media and characteristics of social ecologies.

Although research has documented the heterogeneity and differential treatment and supervision needs in the juvenile offender population, policy responses tend to be designed with only the highest risk offenders in mind. Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach, legislative initiatives should encourage risk assessments of all juvenile sexual offenders and only use aggressive strategies and intensive interventions with offenders who require the greatest level of supervision, treatment, and personal restriction.

Note

1. Primary prevention approaches occur before sexual violence to stop initial victimization; tertiary prevention approaches occur after sexual victimization to address the consequences to the victim as well as the management of known sex offenders to minimize the possibility of reoffense (Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, 2013).

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ABOUT SMART

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 authorized the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within OJP. SMART is responsible for assisting with implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals across the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.