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Examining the developmental trajectories of adolescent sexual offenders

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to assess the validity of the sex-plus versus sex-only categorization method for distinguishing between different types of adolescent sex offenders (ASOs; [Butler & Seto, 2002](#)). It is hypothesized that this categorization method has utility when attempting to distinguish between generalist and specialist ASOs ([Seto & Pullman, 2014](#)). Additionally, further classification of ASOs was attempted using a well known juvenile delinquency classification scheme, early-onset versus late-onset offenders ([Moffitt, 1993](#)). The current study was an archival analysis of clinical files from a sample of 158 male ASOs seen for clinical assessment at a Metropolitan Family Court Clinic. Results indicate that sex-plus offenders are more antisocial, exhibit more psychiatric issues, and have greater deficits in general social skills compared to sex-only offenders. Conversely, sex-only offenders were found to have more atypical sexual interests, and were more likely to have greater deficits in romantic relationships compared to sex-plus offenders. Due to a power related limitation, little support was found for the use of the early-onset versus late-onset classification scheme with ASOs. Overall, these results provide further support to the validity of a sex-only versus sex-plus distinction. Given these results mirror those found in the generalist/specialist literature regarding the etiology of ASOs, sex-only and sex-plus offenders may indeed have different etiological pathways: sex-plus offenders are more driven by general antisociality factors, as the generalist perspective suggests, and sex-only offenders are more driven by special factors, as the specialist explanations suggest.

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Introduction

In North America, between 14% and 18% of arrests for sexual offenses are committed by youth under the age of 18 ([Canadian Center for Justice Statistics, 2003](#); [United States Department of Justice, 2012](#)). Additionally, in an epidemiological study conducted in England, a prevalence rate for male adolescent sexual offending of 1.5 per 1000 males was found ([James & Neil, 1996](#)). Because of the prevalence of adolescent sexual offending, there has been a proliferation of public policies in North America aimed at reducing sexual violence committed by youth. These policies include statutes that increase the likelihood of a juvenile offender being tried as an adult (e.g., [Canadian Library of Parliament, 2011](#); [Griffin, Addie, Adams, &](#)

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Firestone, 2011), and a federal law in the United States that mandates some juvenile sex offenders be placed on public sex offender registries for the rest of their lives (Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, 2006). Understanding the etiology of adolescent sexual offending and the developmental trajectories that lead to this behavior can assist in the development of more effective public policy, assessment, and treatment.

Sex-only and sex-plus offenders

Adolescent sex offenders (ASOs) are a heterogeneous population (e.g., Awad & Saunders, 1991; Becker, Kaplan, & Tenke, 1992; Knight & Prentky, 1993). Thus, ASOs have been categorized in many different ways for etiological and other research and for case management. For example, Butler and Seto (2002) distinguished between two types of ASOs: sex-only offenders, who had only committed sexual offenses and sex-plus offenders, who had committed both sexual and nonsexual offenses. This sex-only versus sex-plus distinction parallels the generalist and specialist perspectives on ASOs (see Seto & Pullman, 2014). The generalist perspective suggests that ASOs are similar to other types of adolescent offenders, except that in addition to non-sexual offenses, they have also committed sexual offenses, and thus are very likely to share similar risk factors and intervention needs. These factors include variables such as antisocial attitudes and beliefs, association with delinquent peers, and substance abuse (Quinsey, Skilling, Lalumière, & Craig, 2004). In support of this proposition, Butler and Seto (2002) found that sex-plus offenders did indeed exhibit more antisocial tendencies compared to sex-only offenders, including pro-criminal sentiments, substance abuse, and risk for future delinquency (as indicated by a delinquency prediction measure). Additionally, Butler and Seto (2002) found that the sex-plus offenders in their sample were very similar to the versatile non-sexual offenders (those who committed aggressive and non-aggressive non-sexual crimes) in their sample.

Conversely, the specialist perspective suggests that ASOs are distinct from other juvenile delinquents, with a unique etiology and different risk factors and treatment needs. In support of this perspective, ASOs differ from other adolescent offenders on variables that are theoretically important in explanations of sexual offending. For example, one specialist explanation of sexual offending, the sexually abused–sexual abuser hypothesis, suggests a link between being the victim of sexual abuse and a perpetrator of sexual abuse (e.g., Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). In support of this hypothesis, ASOs have been found to have higher rates of sexual abuse than other adolescent offenders in a meta-analysis of 31 studies reporting these data (Seto & Lalumière, 2010). This association seems to be specific to sexual abuse because the difference between ASOs and other adolescent offenders on physical abuse history was much smaller.

Another specialist explanation suggests that ASOs have difficulty initiating and maintaining appropriate heterosexual relationships (given that most ASOs are male and sexually prefer females), and therefore seek contact with younger children or sexually coerce female peers or adults because they do not have the social skills necessary to fulfill their sexual and emotional needs in age appropriate consensual relationships (e.g., Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). In support of this heterosocial competence explanation, ASOs have been found to have more heterosocial skills deficits compared to other adolescent offenders (Katz, 1990). Lastly, atypical sexual interests (e.g., sexual interest in young children or sexual violence) have been identified as a factor unique to ASOs compared to other adolescent offenders (Seto & Lalumière, 2010; Seto, Lalumière, & Blanchard, 2000). Butler and Seto (2002) found that, while not statistically significant likely because a small sample size, there was a strong trend for sex-only offenders to be more problematic than sex-plus offenders in the area of atypical sexual interests, including having male victims, victims under the age of 6, and unrelated victims (this last variable was significantly different between groups).

Early and late-onset offenders

Delinquency researchers have also distinguished between early and late-onset offenders. Early-onset offenders refer to youth who begin to display serious conduct problems in childhood, and often continue to engage in antisocial and criminal behavior throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Conversely, late-onset offenders are those who do not have serious childhood conduct problems and begin engaging in crime in their adolescence; these offenders are more likely to desist from crime in adulthood (Patterson & Yoerger, 2002). Early-onset offenders have been found to differ from late-onset offenders in a number of theoretically relevant domains, including having higher rates of neurocognitive abnormalities (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Moffitt, Lynam, & Silva, 1994), hyperactivity (Jeglum-Bartusch, Lynam, Moffitt, & Silva, 1997), delayed motor development (Moffitt, 1990), maltreatment history (Vitelli, 1997), psychiatric history related to inhibition deficits (Taylor, Iacono, & McGue, 2000), and antisocial family environments (Vitelli, 1997). Late-onset offenders have been found to be essentially normative, in the sense that they differ little from non-offending adolescents (Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt, & Silva, 1993; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001).

The current study

The aim of the current study was to extend the findings of Butler and Seto (2002) by assessing differences between sex-only and sex-plus ASOs on a wider range of antisocial and atypical sexual interest variables, with a larger sample size. Additionally, based on the generalist/specialist literature, sex-only and sex-plus offenders were also compared on variables identified in specialist models of adolescent sexual offending (see Hypotheses).

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