



## Original communication

## Trends in child sexual abuse cases referred for forensic examination in Southern Denmark from 2000 to 2011 – Did the ‘Tønder-case’ have an impact?



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## ABSTRACT

In 2005 a serious case of child sexual abuse from the region of Southern Denmark was revealed to the Danish public. The case became known as the ‘Tønder-case’. It was the first in a series of 4–5 serious cases of child maltreatment in Denmark, cases which spurred heavy public debate.

In this study all the cases of child sexual abuse referred for forensic examination in a 12 year period, a total of 368 cases, were systematically evaluated. In order to identify any trends that could be correlated to an impact of the ‘Tønder-case’, cases from 2000 to 2002 and cases from 2009 to 2011 underwent an in-depth analysis.

In the 12 year period there was a significant increase in numbers of cases. In the subgroups, comprised of 113 cases meeting the inclusion criteria, we found a significant increase in the frequency of cases involving incest and systematic abuse, as well as an uncorrelated increase in the frequency of cases where children were placed in foster care prior to the examination. These results were countered by a significant decrease in the number cases police reported child sexual abuse in the same period.

The possible impact that cases like the ‘Tønder-case’ and the following press coverage may have on disclosure and the handling of this type of case by authorities is discussed, as well as further perspectives of extensive press coverage.

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## 1. Introduction

Sexual abuse of children is a world-wide phenomenon that has probably always existed in one form or another.

In recent decades, however, our methods of personal and public communication as well as our use of news media have changed dramatically with the introduction of the internet. This development has opened up for a new and unique criminal environment as well as faster and more diverse press coverage of criminal matters.<sup>1</sup>

In Denmark, as well as abroad, there have been discussions regarding press coverage of child maltreatment cases. On the one hand there is the child's right to privacy, on the other hand there is the fact that awareness of a problem may be the first step towards its solution. Extensive press coverage may harmfully interfere with

court proceedings, but may also nudge the public into reporting more cases of possible abuse.<sup>2–4</sup> In a longer perspective this type of cases can lead to a phenomenon described by sociologists as ‘moral panic’, creating a public demand for political action.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this study was to describe the development in the number and characteristics of cases of sexual abuse of children seen at the Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Southern Denmark during the years 2000–2011. In the middle of this period child sexual abuse became heavily debated due to extensive press coverage and altered guidelines for municipal authorities handling sexual abuse cases. In the centre of the debate was the case of the ‘Tønder-family’.

## 2. Background

The case of the ‘Tønder-family’ represents one of the best known and heavily debated cases of child sexual abuse in Denmark. The two girls from the family were examined at the Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Southern Denmark. The details of the abuse were disclosed to the Danish public in late 2005. A father had been

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exposing his two daughters to various types of sexual abuse since infancy, and the family's internal relations were severely dysfunctional, with both emotional and physical neglect. From the age of 9 the oldest daughter had sexual intercourse with friends of the father or with strangers for relatively small sums of money (10–20€). It was revealed that at least 16 local men had visited the family home and paid for the sexual services delivered by the girl aged 9–11, including full sexual intercourse. None, however, had reported the case to the authorities, until the police received an anonymous tip from a customer, in November 2005. A total of 15 men, including the father, were convicted of different types of sexual assault.

Following the case of the Tønder-family, several cases of severe child maltreatment have been revealed, and the subject played a relatively large role in the Danish public debate in the years that followed.<sup>6</sup> Ten years later the citizens of the city of Tønder still feel the city 'branded' as the name has become almost synonymous with child sexual abuse.<sup>7</sup> The oldest girl in the 'Tønder-family' is now an adult. She has been giving anonymized interviews in a large Danish newspaper (Politiken) on several occasions in 2014 and 2015. In these interviews she states that her treatment by authorities after the disclosure has been substandard, and among other factors she blames the fact that she has become a 'secret celebrity', making it difficult for carers to maintain neutrality.<sup>8</sup>

In 2005 came a new Danish legislation regarding quality and continuity in the municipal handling of cases involving vulnerable children, 'Anbringelsesreformen',<sup>9</sup> and in 2007 the Danish police force underwent a structural reform that included centralisation and specialisation of the force.

In the summer of 2012 a Danish newspaper looked into the frequency with which the public reported suspicion of child maltreatment to the authorities.<sup>10</sup> This investigation showed a rise in the number of reports of 40% in just two years. The reason for this rise was believed to be the consistent media involvement as well as targeted initiatives aiming at getting the public involved and thus helping authorities recognizing the cases. There is no available data, however, regarding case characteristics. It is, therefore, not known if this development is a general tendency or only involves certain types of cases.

### 3. Material and methods

Definitions: the definitions used in this paper are following the Danish penal code regarding sexual offences.

- *Incest*: Sexual relationship between lineal relatives, regardless of gender. Thus a sexual relationship between siblings is *not* incest in the Danish legislation.
- *Systematic abuse*: Sexual abuse on at least two separate occasions over a period of at least 2 weeks.
- *Authority referral*: When a case is reported to the police by the local authorities. Contrasting private reporting from individuals in close proximity of the child, for instance neighbours or relatives.
- *Social grounds*: When authorities take action in a child maltreatment case, on grounds of sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, mental disabilities or psychiatric disorders.
- *Minor*: In Denmark adolescents are considered minors in a sexual respect at the age of 14 and below. Consensual sexual intercourse is not illegal from the age of 15 and above, regardless of gender.

Data was collected retrospectively from the database of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Southern Denmark. The Institute covers two police districts (including the city of

Tønder) and handles all forensic cases in a population of approximately 1.2 million. All cases involving minors <15 years of age, classified as sexual abuse/rape in the 12 year period of Jan 2000–Dec 2011 were included. A two-step approach was chosen. Baseline characteristics for all cases were analysed followed by an in-depth analysis of the cases from 2000–2002 to 2009–2011. The material available was of variable length, but included police reports, selected files from local authorities on child welfare and selected hospital records. All available material dates from before the forensic examination in the case in question was carried out. The available material was part of the police investigation of the case, and the selection of material was made by the police officer handling the case. It is, however, a long-standing praxis in Denmark to have a high level of information given to the forensic examiners and it is assumed that the information available in each case represents all the information known to the police at the time of the examination.

Cases of consensual sexual intercourse with a minor aged 13 or 14 (statutory rape) were excluded.

The forensic examination was performed by experienced forensic doctors in conjunction with an experienced paediatrician. Both have signed each report. The forensic examination included a full-body examination and photo-colposcopy. Results from the charts were used to classify retrospectively according to the Adams classification.<sup>11</sup> For elaboration, please refer to the cited paper.

- Adams 1: Normal findings or findings due to disorders not relevant for sexual abuse
- Adams 2: Unspecific findings that may or may not be the result of abuse, depending on history and the timing of the examination.
- Adams 3: Concerning for abuse or trauma. Findings noted in abused children, but not enough evidence to say that abuse is the only cause.
- Adams 4: Clear evidence of blunt force or penetrating trauma.

Data was entered using the EpiData database ([www.epidata.com](http://www.epidata.com)) and analysed using STATA vs. 12 ([www.stata.com](http://www.stata.com)). Data was reported as percentages or percentage points with 95% confidence intervals (CI). Data was considered non-parametric and the Mann–Whitney U-test was used, as well as the Fisher's Exact for dichotomous data. Multivariate analysis was carried out using logistic regression modelling.

### 4. Results

Inclusion of cases is illustrated in the flowchart seen in Fig. 1. The average number of cases in the first half of the period (2000–2005) was 27.2 (range 22–39) and 34.2 (range 22–41) in the second half (2006–2011). This covers a rise in the total number of cases of 25.8% (CI 19.2–33.2). Following exclusion of cases the rise is 22.2% (CI 15.1–30.8). There is a certain degree of variation over the years, which is illustrated in Fig. 2.

The demographic composition of the included children did not vary over the years. There was a gender distribution of included cases of 20.0% boys and 80.0% girls in 2000–2, and 20.6% vs. 79.4% in 2009–11, respectively. The age distribution was equally uniform. The overall range was 2–14 years of age. The average in 2000–2 was 7.4 years (CI 6.4–8.4) and in 2009–11 it was 7.9 years (CI 6.9–8.9).

#### 4.1. Case characteristics

The case characteristics are shown in Table 1. There was a significant rise in the frequency of cases involving incest, systematic

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