



Child sexual assault: Risk factors for girls



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ABSTRACT

To identify prospectively measured risk factors of sexual assault (SA) among girls age 17 and younger. The data come from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and are derived from interviews with 1,087 girls, their primary caregivers, and household heads. The data were collected from the girls' first year of life through their early twenties. Factors measured during childhood were used to predict whether the girls experienced a subsequent first sexual assault before the age of 18. Prospectively measured risk factors associated with subsequent child SA included the absence of one or both parents, maternal education less than college, family income below 400% of the federal poverty threshold, low caregiver warmth, child internalizing and externalizing behaviors, impulsivity, low achievement scores, and having been classified by their school as needing special education. Girls with behavioral health problems and learning challenges are at heightened risk for sexual assault. Research on behavioral health consequences of SA should control for preexisting SA risk factors to more accurately estimate the impact of child SA on subsequent behavioral health.

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Introduction

Prospective studies of child sexual assault (SA) risk factors are important for researchers seeking to understand the etiology of victimization and for practitioners and policy makers seeking to protect children from sexual assault. Prospective measures of child sexual assault risk factors are also necessary to understand the effects of sexual assault on subsequent mental health and substance abuse problems. In the absence of longitudinal data, researchers have been unable to measure risk factors before the sexual assault occurs; they have instead relied upon retrospective measures of potential risk factors. A number of factors have been identified that may increase the vulnerability of girls to sexual assault, but in the absence of pre-assault measures of children's functioning levels and family relationships, it has not been possible to distinguish between risk factors for, and consequences of, sexual assault. This study examines the role of prospectively measured risk factors for the sexual assault of girls age 17 and younger.

Primarily through qualitative interviews with sexual offenders and retrospective studies, a number of potential risk factors have been proposed. These include characteristics of the child, family, peer group, community and socioeconomic (e.g., family background) factors. The current study will focus on the extent to which specific child and family characteristics and socioeconomic background factors increase the vulnerability of girls to a subsequent first sexual assault.

Child characteristics

Qualitative studies of pedophiles indicate that, in addition to preferences regarding age, gender, and appearance of the child, offenders tend to select children who do not have many friends and who appear to lack confidence, to have low self-esteem, and to be unhappy and emotionally needy (Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989; Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995). Findings from a qualitative study of prisoners indicated that rapists select "easy prey" who appear vulnerable and helpless (Stevens, 1994). Consistent with these findings, Vicary, Klingaman, and Harkness (1995), in one of the few prospective studies of

sexual assault of girls younger than 18, found poor peer relations and *emotional tone* (i.e., unhappy, low self-esteem) to be risk factors for date rape.

In the absence of pre-assault measures, researchers seeking to identify SA risk factors have attempted to reconstruct childhood circumstances with retrospective data, such as by asking respondents (SA victims or parents of SA victims) to recall what the child's developmental, psychiatric, and medical state had been before the sexual abuse occurred (Mannarino, Cohen, & Berman, 1994). Researchers have also asked adult women to recall their level of happiness and their social life during their childhood without reference to when the child sexual assault occurred (Fleming, Mullen, & Bammer, 1997; Hill et al., 2000; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993). Other researchers do not specify whether potential risk factors were measured before or after the first instance of sexual abuse (Paradise, Rose, Sleeper, & Nathanson, 1994). Keeping in mind the lack of clarity on temporal order of measurement, the findings of these retrospective studies indicate that women who had been sexually abused in childhood were more likely than other women to report having been unhappy and socially isolated during childhood and to have had more psychiatric and developmental problems.

Disabilities of any kind may increase the vulnerability of children to sexual predators. Children with disabilities, including learning disabilities and speech and language impairments, are more likely to have experienced SA than have other children (Brunnberg, Bostrom, & Berglund, 2012; Paradise et al., 1994; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000). A meta-analysis by Jones and colleagues (Jones, Bellis, et al., 2012) found the association to be especially strong among children with mental or intellectual disabilities. SA in childhood has also been found to be associated with lower IQ scores and academic performance (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2008; Fleming et al., 1997; Manion et al., 1996; Paradise et al., 1994), both of which could be indicators of intellectual disabilities. The extent to which childhood intellectual disabilities are SA risk factors as opposed to SA consequences, however, is not clear because disabilities were assessed by the researchers only after the sexual assault occurred.

Studies have also found attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to be associated with having been sexually abused as a child (Lara et al., 2009; Merry & Andrews, 1994). ADHD has a strong genetic component (Tannock, 1998), and so it is unlikely that SA or other trauma causes ADHD. It has been suggested, however, that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms may be misdiagnosed as ADHD (Weinstein, 2000). It is therefore of interest whether impulsivity, inattention, hyperactivity, and externalizing behavior (which can be symptoms of both ADHD and PTSD) are risk factors for sexual assault in childhood. Research in the field of criminal justice suggests that low self-control (which includes impulsivity) heightens one's risk of victimization, presumably because one is focused on the present and fails to correctly judge the potential dangers a given situation poses (Higgins, Jennings, Tewksbury, & Gibson, 2009; Schreck, 1999).

Family characteristics

In addition to individual-level child characteristics, the qualitative studies of pedophiles suggest that offenders tend to select children from certain family types, for example children from families in which parents do not show the child sufficient affection (Conte et al., 1989). Finkelhor (1980) has suggested that absent, emotionally distant, and unaffectionate parents may cause girls to be more vulnerable to the advances of men who offer affection but intend them harm. Some retrospective studies have found associations between child sexual assault and the quality of family life (e.g., no adult female in whom to confide, lower scores on the Parental Bonding Instrument; Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1996; Fleming et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2000; Mullen et al., 1993). But because the data were gathered retrospectively, the causal direction of the relationships could not be determined. Not only will memories will be altered by the passing of years, but also the experience of SA and its aftermath may alter the parent–child relationship itself.

The qualitative research on pedophiles also indicates that offenders may tend to select children in families headed by an overburdened single mother who welcomes the attention a family “friend” or boyfriend shows her children (Conte et al., 1989). Cross-sectional surveys corroborate this: living apart from the mother or father and the presence of a stepfather during childhood have been found to be associated with an increased likelihood of SA during childhood (Finkelhor, 1979, 1993; Fleming et al., 1997; Vogeltanz et al., 1999). Family structure can change across the span of childhood, and so it is necessary for researchers to ascertain the structure of the family at the time of the sexual assault, yet this is often not done. This may be problematic because if a family member were implicated in the SA or if the parents' reaction to learning of the SA led to family turmoil, then family living standards, family structure and marital conflict may all have been affected by the sexual assault (Elliott & Carnes, 2001).

Family background

Neither race nor low family income is generally found to be associated with child sexual assault in community surveys and population-based studies (Putman, 2003). In one New Zealand study, information on family socioeconomic status and mother's education was obtained from the parents at the time of the child's birth, clearly preceding the occurrence of SA. Unskilled or semiskilled parental occupations were not associated with subsequent sexual abuse, but low maternal education raised the likelihood of child sexual abuse (Fergusson et al., 1996). There are several reasons why low maternal education might be associated with the sexual assault of girls. A mother with low educational attainment may have intellectual deficits and her daughter may have similar deficits, resulting in the daughter being more easily led by sexual predators. A mother with low educational attainment may also have low income and therefore be less able to afford a safe environment for her

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