

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—PSYCHOLOGY

Female Youth Who Sexually Coerce: Prevalence, Risk, and Protective Factors in Two National High School Surveys

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Sexual coercion is recognized as a serious societal problem. Correlates and risk factors of sexually abusive behavior in females are not well known.

Aim. Etiological theory and empirical study of female perpetrators of sexual coercion are usually based on small or highly selected samples. Specifically, population-based data are needed to elucidate risk/protective factors.

Main Outcome Measures. Main outcome measures include a self-report questionnaire containing 65 items tapping socio-demographic and health conditions, social relations, sexual victimization, conduct problems and a set of normative and deviant sexual cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Methods. We used a 2003–2004 survey of sexual attitudes and experiences among high school students in Norway and Sweden to identify risk factors and correlates to sexually coercive behavior (response rate 80%); 4,363 females participated (Mean = 18.1 years).

Results. Thirty-seven women (0.8%) reported sexual coercion (ever talked someone into, used pressure, or forced somebody to have sex). Sexually coercive compared with non-coercive women were similar on socio-demographic variables, but reported less parental care and more parental overprotection, aggression, depressive symptoms, and substance misuse. Also, sexually coercive females reported more sexual lust, sex partners, penetrative sexual victimization, rape myths, use of violent porn, and friends more likely to use porn. When using the Swedish subsample to differentiate risk factors specific for sexual coercion from those for antisocial behavior in general, we found less cannabis use, but more sexual preoccupation, pro-rape attitudes, and friends using violent porn in sexually coercive compared with non-sex conduct problem females.

Conclusions. Sexually coercive behavior in high school women was associated with general risk/needs factors for antisocial behavior, but also with specific sexuality-related risk factors. This differential effect has previously been overlooked, agrees with similar findings in men, and should have substantial etiological importance. **Kjellgren C, Priebe G, Svedin CG, Mossige S, and Långström N. Female youth who sexually coerce: Prevalence, risk, and protective factors in two national high school surveys. J Sex Med 2011;8:3354–3362.**

Key Words. Young Females; Sexual Coercion; Conduct Problems; Child Abuse; Sexual Behavior; Pornography; Population Survey; Adolescents; Youth; Young Adults

Introduction

Sexual coercion is recognized as a serious societal problem [1]. Although there is a substantial literature on sexual coercion in men, mostly from clinical and forensic settings, we know very

little about females who commit sexual abuse. A review of conviction rates and self-report victimization data from North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand suggested that females commit 4–5% of all sexual offences [2]. Recent reviews [3,4] have revisited and

questioned some of the early assumptions regarding female sexual offending and professionals' minimization of sexual coercion by women has been highlighted [5]. Correlates and risk factors of sexually abusive behavior in females are not well known. One obvious reason is the scarcity of females in clinical samples of sexual offenders.

Uncontrolled studies with clinical and forensic samples of sexually coercive adolescent females suggest sexual victimization [6–8], adverse home environments [7,8], and drug abuse [8] as potential risk factors. Further, they typically abuse children under age 12 years [6–8], significantly younger than in clinical samples of male sexual offenders [9], often have repetitive patterns of sexual offending with multiple victims [7], and start offending sexually earlier than male adolescent sex offenders [9]. Few studies have addressed sexually abusive behavior among young females in the general population. However, two school-based U.S. surveys [10,11] found that 0.8% and 1.3% of female 9th and 12th grade students, respectively, had ever forced someone to have sex. Females who reported sexual coercion had been sexually victimized themselves about twice as often as those who did not. Further, sexual aggression was independently associated with use of illegal drugs and anabolic steroids, gang membership, more time spent “hanging out,” poorer academic performance and suicidal ideation or attempts [11].

To date, it is uncertain if correlates or risk factors are specific to sexual coercion or common to both sexual and other antisocial behavior. Studies that used comparison samples contrasted sexually coercive female youth either with non-criminal population controls or with non-sexually antisocial comparison subjects. For example, less school problems, fighting, and substance misuse was found among 11 female adolescent sex offenders than in an age-matched sample of female non-sex offenders [12]. They also held distorted beliefs about the victim and minimized offender responsibility more often than 12 matched non-sex offenders and 21 non-criminal controls [13]. Comparisons with non-criminal population controls could identify risk factors related to criminal offending in general, including sexually coercive behavior. However, simultaneous comparisons of sexually coercive youth with *both* non-criminal *and* non-sexually antisocial comparison subjects are needed to improve the identification of risk factors.

We explored sexually coercive behavior in a large, contemporary population-based survey of adolescent and young adult females in Norway and

Sweden. Further, we investigated risk/protective factors for sexual coercion by comparing females who reported being sexually abusive with those who did not. Finally, to separate risk/needs factors common to various forms of antisocial behavior from those specifically associated with sexual coercion, we used the Swedish subsample to compare sexually coercive females with non-sexual conduct problem subjects and non-criminal controls.

Method

We used the Norwegian and Swedish subsamples of the 2003–2004 Baltic Sea Regional Study on Adolescent Sexuality, a population survey of adolescent sexual attitudes and experiences [14].

Subjects

All participants were third-year high school students from Norway and Sweden. The sampling of complete classes was stratified to represent students in both vocational and academic study programs. Among eligible females in sampled classes, 5,059 students aged 17–20 years old participated (response rate = 82% in Norway and 77% in Sweden). A total of 2,775 (55%) students were from the nine largest urban areas in Norway and 2,284 (45%) from two major and three smaller cities in Sweden. 671 participants (13.3%) were 17 years old, 3,537 (69.9%) were 18, 688 (13.6%) were 19, and 163 respondents (3.2%) were 20 years old (mean [M] = 18.1 years, standard deviation [SD] = 0.63, median [Mdn] = 18). Eligible but non-participating students were absent from school on the day of the survey or actively chose not to participate.

Data Collection

All students completed the anonymous self-report questionnaire during school hours. In Norway, a school nurse or teacher assisted in the data collection. A research assistant supervised the data collection in Sweden. Informed consent to participate was obtained after the students had been explicitly informed that they were free to deny or terminate their participation at any time without explanation. To ensure that respondents did not influence each other, they completed the questionnaires individually at the same time, and were seated to guarantee confidentiality. The completion took 30–60 minutes depending on reading level. In Norway, a second opportunity to respond was arranged within a week for students absent at the first occasion. Respondents' anonymity was emphasized orally and in writing in both countries.

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