



## Research article

# Testing the sexually abused–sexual abuser hypothesis: A prospective longitudinal birth cohort study



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## ABSTRACT

The sexually abused–sexual abuser hypothesis posits that persons, especially males, who are sexually abused as children are at particular risk of sexually abusing others later in life. We tested this hypothesis by prospectively examining associations between maltreatment and offending in a birth cohort of 38,282 males with a maltreatment history and/or at least one finalized offense. We examined these associations within the context of the wider birth population. Proportionally few boys were the subject of official notifications for sexual abuse (14.8% of maltreated boys, and 1.4% of the birth population); proportionally very few of these sexually abused boys (3%) went on to become sexual offenders; and, contrary to findings typically reported in retrospective clinical studies, proportionally few sexual offenders (4%) had a confirmed history of sexual abuse. Poly-victimization (exposure to multiple types of maltreatment) was significantly associated with sexual offending, violent offending, and general (nonsexual, nonviolent) offending. We found no specific association between sexual abuse and sexual offending, and nor did we find any association between sexual abuse and sexual offending specifically within the poly-victimization group. The total number of sexual abuse notifications did make a small unique contribution to the variance in sexual offending compared to other offending. Implications concerning maltreated boys and male sexual offenders are discussed.

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## Introduction

The sexually abused–sexual abuser hypothesis posits that persons, especially males, who are sexually abused as children are at particular risk of sexually abusing others later in life (Garland & Dougher, 1990; Glasser et al., 2001; Lanyon, 1986). Evidence supporting this hypothesized link between sexual victimization and sexually abusive behavior has been reported in both retrospective (see Jespersen, Lalumiere, & Seto, 2009; Seto & Lalumiere, 2010) and prospective studies (Ogloff, Cutajar, Mann, & Mullen, 2012; Salter et al., 2003); however, it has been difficult to draw definitive conclusions because of a range of methodological problems associated with both approaches.

Retrospective studies consistently report a high prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in the developmental backgrounds of both adolescent and adult sexual offenders. Particularly high rates of sexual abuse – up to 70% or more – are found in clinical studies, where adjudicated sexual offenders disclose childhood maltreatment histories, usually to their therapists, and often in prison settings (e.g. Dhawan & Marshall, 1996; Ford & Linney, 1995; Levenson, Willis, & Prescott, 2014; Worling, 1995). Prospective studies examining offending outcomes among groups of maltreated children also suggest a link between sexual abuse and sexual offending, albeit rather weaker and in the context of a more general association between maltreatment and

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offending (Ogloff et al., 2012; Salter et al., 2003; Widom & Ames, 1994). Some researchers have concluded that childhood sexual abuse is a specific risk factor for committing sexual offenses in adolescence and adulthood (Burton, 2003; Ogloff et al., 2012; Veneziano, Veneziano, & LeGrand, 2000). Others have suggested a more general link whereby all types of maltreatment, including sexual abuse, increase the risk of all types of offending, including sexual offending (e.g. Hanson & Slater, 1988; Vander Mey, 1988; Widom & Ames, 1994).

The present study aimed to examine links between sexual abuse and sexual offending using a prospective longitudinal birth cohort design. In doing so, we aimed to overcome several important limitations of previous studies by (a) avoiding the many potential biases associated with retrospective clinical self-report designs, (b) examining abuse-offending links specifically for males (who comprise the overwhelming majority of convicted sexual offenders), (c) considering the prevalence of sexual abuse and sexual offending, and the links between the two, within the context of the wider birth cohort population, and (d) controlling for the potential effects of abuse age and poly-victimization.

### *Specificity, Generality, or Both?*

Two recent meta-analytic reviews of (mainly) retrospective clinical studies examined associations between sexual abuse and sexual offending. Seto and Lalumiere (2010) reviewed 59 studies that had examined similarities and differences between adolescent sexual offenders and adolescent nonsexual offenders, including 31 studies that examined associations specifically between sexual abuse histories and offending. Jespersen et al. (2009) reviewed 17 studies that had examined the prevalence of sexual and other abuse among adult sexual and nonsexual offenders. Both reviews concluded that sexual offenders were more likely than nonsexual offenders to have been sexually abused, and that sexual offenders were more likely to have been exposed to sexual abuse than to other kinds of maltreatment. The authors of these reviews listed numerous serious limitations in the original studies, and therefore in their meta-analyses, including sampling, recall, and other potential biases. Findings may also be affected by expectancy biases, whereby clinicians treating sexual offenders may be particularly inclined to ask about sexual abuse and to note its presumed significance. Offenders themselves may see advantages in either under-reporting or over-reporting sexual abuse. In any case, a strong retrospective association does not equate to a strong prospective association – even if a very high proportion of sexual offenders have been sexually abused, it is possible that very few sexual abuse victims go on to commit sexual offenses.

Several prospective studies have also examined purported links between sexual abuse and sexual offending. Widom and Ames (1994) prospectively examined the relationships between child maltreatment and later offending by following a group of 908 children with substantiated abuse or neglect whose cases were dealt with by the juvenile or adult courts in the United States between 1968 and 1971. To avoid problems with the temporal sequencing of abuse and offending, only children under 11 years at the time of their abuse were included in the study. Offending outcomes were examined for the 908 maltreatment cases and a comparison group of 667 matched for age, gender and race. Compared to the non-maltreatment comparison group, children who experienced any type of maltreatment were significantly more likely to be arrested for an offense of any kind. This general effect for maltreatment was found for both juvenile and adult arrests. Sexual abuse was found to have no additional effect on general arrests. Sexually abused children were more likely to be arrested for prostitution, but not for other sexual offenses (rape, sodomy, incest, child molesting or public indecency). In fact physical abuse, and not sexual abuse, was associated with a marginally greater risk of committing violent sexual offenses. Widom and Ames did not examine associations between sexual abuse and sexual offending specifically for males. This is a crucial omission, because males are about half as likely to be sexually abused, and many times more likely than are females to commit sexual offenses (Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008).

Salter et al. (2003) examined United Kingdom national records to identify sexually abusive behavior among 224 males who as children had been referred to a London hospital sexual abuse clinic between 1980 and 1992. The boys' mean age at the time of their initial presentation was 11 years, and all were at least 18 years of age at follow-up. The follow-up period ranged from seven to 19 years (median age at follow-up = 22.3 years). Seven of the sexually abused boys (3.1%) had been cautioned for, or convicted of, a sexual offense. An additional 19 (8.5%) were considered to have engaged in sexually abusive behavior subsequent to their own abuse, based on evidence in clinic or social service files. Because this study did not include a control group of non-sexually abused or non-abused males, its findings do not help to answer the question of the specificity versus generality of the abused-abuser link. However its within-group comparisons suggested a number of potential mediators of the link between sexual abuse and sexual offending. Specifically, predictors of later sexually abusive behavior were (1) material neglect (odds ratio [OR] = 3.4); (2) witnessing serious family violence (OR = 3.1); (3) lack of supervision (OR = 3.0); and (4) being sexually abused by a female (OR = 3.0). These findings suggest that the links between sexual abuse and sexual offending may be mediated by other (nonsexual) developmental adversities, including other kinds of maltreatment.

A recent, larger prospective study suggests that a specific link between sexual abuse and sexual offending may exist within the more general association between maltreatment and offending. Ogloff et al. (2012) examined the records of 2759 Australian children who had been medically assessed for suspected sexual abuse between 1965 and 1995, and followed these cases up with police records checks in 2010. Police checks were also conducted for a comparison group of 2677 persons selected from the electoral role and matched with the sexual abuse sample for age and gender. Almost one quarter (23.8%) of the sexually abused sample had at least one recorded offense, compared to just 5.9% of the comparison group. The sexually abused offenders also had more offenses ( $M = 32.6$  vs  $19.2$ ), and were more likely to be imprisoned (4% vs 0.05%), than the non-abused offenders.

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