



Research article

Similarities and differences in adolescence-onset versus adulthood-onset sexual abuse incidents[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A sample of males who had first committed sexual offences against children in either adolescence ($n = 230$; $M = 14.0$ years, $SD = 1.5$) or adulthood ($n = 280$; $M = 34.4$ years, $SD = 11.7$) were compared on measures relating to the circumstances of their first known sexual abuse incident. Considerable diversity in the circumstances of these first incidents was observed for both groups. However, adulthood-onset sexual abuse most often occurred following a long-standing familial relationship with a female victim, and in a home setting. The first incident for adolescence-onset offenders also tended to occur in the context of a long-term relationship and against a female child in a home setting, but more commonly against a nonfamilial victim. Adulthood-onset offenders abused older children, were more likely to engage in penetrative sexual behaviors, and went on to abuse over a longer duration than adolescence-onset offenders. Adolescence-onset offences were more likely to be witnessed by a third party. Findings and their implications for prevention are considered from a situational crime prevention perspective.

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Introduction

Despite growing evidence to the contrary, adolescent sexual offenders are often assumed to be at high risk of persistent sexual offending into and throughout their adulthood. This assumption was originally fueled by early clinical studies, which reported that adult sexual offenders typically began sexual offending as adolescents (Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Rouleau, & Murphy, 1987; Groth, Longo, & McFadin, 1982). The weight of evidence now indicates instead that most adolescent sexual offenders do not go on to become adult sexual offenders (e.g., Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Nisbet, Wilson, & Smallbone, 2004), and that most adult sexual offenders do not begin sexual offending in their adolescence (Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991; McKillop, Smallbone, Wortley, & Andjic, 2012; Smallbone & Wortley, 2004). This pattern appears to hold for both adult-victim and child-victim sexual offending.

Three important findings have emerged with respect specifically to sexually abusive behavior (sexual offences against children aged under 16 years). First, unlike for other types of crimes, there appear to be two peak risk periods associated with the perpetration of child sexual abuse – the first in adolescence and the second in the mid- to late-30s (Hanson, 2002). Second,

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adolescent sexual abusers are at high risk of being subsequently arrested for a range of nonsexual offences, but proportionally few continue sexual offending into adulthood (McCann & Lussier, 2008; Nisbet et al., 2004). Third, those adolescent sexual abusers who do continue to commit sexual offences into adulthood tend to desist by their early-thirties (Lussier & Blokland, 2014). Thus, although there is undoubtedly some overlap, adolescence-onset and adulthood-onset sexual abuse offenders appear to be two largely distinct offender populations (Smallbone & Cale, 2015).

Theoretical explanations for this bimodal distribution have focused on possible qualitative differences between the two groups. Adolescence-onset sexual offending has been conceived of as an extension of existing anti-social or aggressive tendencies, whereby the emergence of sexually aggressive or abusive behavior coincides with the onset of ordinary sexual exploration and peer activities in adolescence (Caldwell, 2002; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, 2009; Zimring, 2004). In this regard, adolescence-onset sexual abuse may be partly explained by the psychological, physiological and social changes occurring in adolescence that give impetus to sexual motivations and present new opportunities for sexual interaction, but at the same time limit adolescents' capacities for responsible decision-making (Haigh, 2009). This may be compounded by their immature understanding of sexuality, sexual relationships, and sexual behavior (Rich, 2011). Adolescents are also likely to be subjected to lower levels of supervision and external control than in earlier stages of their development (Calder, 2001).

While individual and psychosocial factors (e.g., attachment problems, poor social skills and intimacy deficits, lack of empathy, limited perceptive-taking, and emotional regulation problems) have been identified as potential precursors to sexually abusive behavior in adulthood (for example, Beech & Ward, 2004; Marshall, 2010; Marshall & Marshall, 2010; Ward & Beech, 2006), adulthood-onset sexual offending behavior has also been conceptualized as coincident with changes in individuals' families, work, and social circumstances (e.g., [step]fatherhood, child-oriented employment) providing unsupervised access to children and opportunities related to their age, status, and guardianship responsibilities (Hanson, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). Sexual abuse incidents, for the most part, occur in the milieu of ordinary social interaction. Thus, more needs to be understood about the situational (physical and social) dynamics of these incidents, at both developmental stages, to establish how such individual vulnerabilities manifest in sexually abusive behavior at particular times and places. This is particularly relevant to the first sexual abuse incident where child-sexual-abuse specific motivations (e.g., stable sexual interests in children) are not necessarily yet well-established and where contextual factors may have a more proximal influence at this stage in their sexual offending career.

Despite long-standing calls (e.g., since Kaufman et al., 1996) for more integrated investigations of sexual offences perpetrated by adolescents and adults, empirical research remains limited. Few studies have directly compared the sexual abuse characteristics of adult and adolescent offender populations (Cyr, Wright, McDuff, & Perron, 2002; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Kaufman et al., 1996; Miranda & Corcoran, 2000; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999) and only Lussier, Blokland, Mathesius, Pardini, and Loeber (2015) have investigated childhood risk factors associated with adolescence-onset and adulthood-onset sexual offending.

Miranda and Corcoran (2000) found that adult offenders perpetrated more offences, maintained longer relationships with their victims and engaged in more intrusive sexual acts than adolescents, but that adolescents used more force during abuse incidents. Kaufman et al. (1996) also found that adolescents tended to use more coercive (i.e., threatening) strategies than adults and more frequently used weapons to undermine the victim and gain compliance. Finkelhor et al. (2009) found that, compared to adult offenders, adolescents more often offended in groups and abused younger and more male victims. Incidents perpetrated by adolescents tended to occur in the home, but less so than adults, with school-based abuse also common for adolescents (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Whereas Miranda and Corcoran (2000) reported higher levels of familial abuse by adolescents, Finkelhor et al. (2009) reported higher levels of nonfamilial abuse. Cyr et al. (2002) found, with the exception of penetration (perpetrated more by adolescents in their study than adults), there were similarities in the characteristics of sexual abuse perpetrated by adolescent or adult family members. Rudd and Herzberger (1999) identified similarities in the use of force and bribes when comparing brother-sister incest with father-daughter incest, however the length of sexual abuse tended to be longer for father-daughter incest cases. This appeared to be associated with the brother maturing and leaving the home (Rudd & Herzberger, 1999). They also identified lack of supervision as being particularly important for sibling-incest cases. Lussier et al.'s (2015) findings revealed some similarities and differences between the adolescence-onset and adulthood-onset groups with regard to childhood risk factors. Their findings indicated that a composite of individual, family, and neighborhood risk factors best predict the onset of sexual offending and that childhood risk factors might be more salient for predicting adolescence-onset than adulthood-onset offending. The question as to why some individuals begin sexually offending in adolescence and others in adulthood, however, remains largely unanswered.

We think situational theories may go some way towards answering this question. Despite the successful application of situational theories to crime and delinquency more generally, much less attention has been given to its application for preventing child sexual abuse, where there remains a tendency, both theoretically and empirically, to focus on the dispositional characteristics of offenders. This has meant that, historically, the circumstances and interpersonal contexts within which these offences occur have been inadvertently overlooked (Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). More recent empirical studies show some promise for the utility of situational theories in the explanation of sexual abuse. For example, Wortley and Smallbone (2006) demonstrated that the environmental factors present within situations preceding child sexual abuse provided both the opportunity and the impetus to sexually abuse. Leclerc, Smallbone, and Wortley (2013) found that situational factors (e.g., presence of a guardian) have an influence on perpetration characteristics, including the severity and duration of sexual abuse.

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