High-risk sexual offenders: Towards a new typology

Kimberley Kaseweter [a], Michael Woodworth [a,*], Matt Logan [b], Tabatha Freimuth [c]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia Okanagan, Canada
[b] Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canada
[c] Mental Health and Substance Use Services, Interior Health, Canada

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: High-risk sexual offenders have been identified as a distinct group of sexual offenders due to the seriousness of their offenses, as well as their high probability of reoffending. However, high-risk sexual offenders themselves represent a complex and heterogeneous group about which relatively little is still known. The purpose of this research was to provide a more refined understanding of high-risk sexual offenders by developing a profile of their behavior using offender and offense characteristics.
Methods: Latent class analysis was utilized to develop a typology of some of the highest-risk sexual offenders ($N = 92$) in Canada using characteristics of the offenders and their index crimes.
Results: Three subtypes of high-risk sexual offenders were identified in the latent class analysis. In follow up covariate analyses, these three distinct groups were found to significantly differ on important offender characteristics and prior criminal offenses.
Conclusions: Findings from this study highlight the heterogeneity and complexity of the highest-risk group of sexual offenders in Canada, with important investigative, therapeutic and preventative implications.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Lawmakers and the general public typically view sexual offenders as a homogeneous population with a high risk of recidivism and a low probability of rehabilitation (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Sample & Bray, 2006). However, research suggests that sexual offenders are a heterogeneous population varying considerably in their offending behavior, motivations, and risk for reoffending (e.g., Hanson, Harris, Helmus, & Thornton, 2014; Harris, Smallbone, Dennison, & Knight, 2009; Levenson et al., 2007; Woodworth et al., 2013). Specifically, findings from a recent meta-analysis suggest that the majority of sexual offenders have a 5-year sexual recidivism rate of 7% or less, and a 10-year rate between 6 and 22% (Helmus, Hanson, Thornton, Babchishin, & Harris, 2012). In contrast, those estimated to be at a high-risk for sexual reoffending, as measured by the Violence Risk Scale–Sexual Offender Version (VRS-SO), have been found to have a 5-year sexual recidivism rate of 41% and a 10-year rate of 70% (Olver, Wong, Nicholaichuk, & Gordon, 2007). As such, clinicians use the label "high-risk" in an attempt to distinguish sexual offenders who have the highest probability of reoffending - a designation that often bears severe consequences within the legal system (Hanson, 1998; Woodworth et al., 2013).

Internationally, legislation exists allowing for offenders at an elevated risk of recidivism to be sentenced indeterminately, such as America's Sexually Violent Predator laws and Canada's dangerous offender laws. However, labeling individuals as high-risk can be a consequential decision, not only in terms of restricted liberties for that individual but also due to additional costs associated with indeterminate sentencing, treatment, and community supervision. Further, the assumption that high-risk sexual offenders can be placed into a single category may be misguided. Despite an association with increased violence, number of victims, and propensity for sexual reoffending (Levenson, 2004; Lussier, Deslauriers-Varin, & Râtel, 2010), high-risk sexual offenders have been drastically under-researched, resulting in a limited understanding of these dangerous offenders.

In response to the paucity of information, Woodworth et al. (2013) directly investigated the relationship between offender characteristics and offending behaviors in a group of high-risk sexual offenders. The researchers found important and significant differences between offender type (e.g., child molesters, rapists, mixed offenders) and sexual fantasy, paraphilia, and psychopathy. Further, offender type was related to significant differences in offending behavior, such as number of past sexual convictions, number of victims, and weapon use. For example, 85% of the high-risk sample was found to have a sexual paraphilia, the number and kind of which was significantly related to offender type. Specifically, high-risk exclusive child molesters were more likely to receive a paraphilia diagnosis and have a greater number of sexual convictions and victims than other offender types. Similarly, deviant sexual fantasies were highest in exclusive child molesters, with 80% reporting having sexual fantasies compared to 55% of rapists. Despite an overall increased risk, high-risk sexual offenders have also been found to be

---

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia Okanagan, 3333 University Way, Kelowna, British Columbia V1V 1V7, Canada.
  E-mail address: michael.woodworth@ubc.ca (M. Woodworth).

heterogeneous in their risk for reoffending (Hanson et al., 2014; Lussier et al., 2010). According to Hanson et al. (2014), the risk of sexual recidivism for high-risk sexual offenders is cut in half for every five years that they remained offense-free. Specifically, a 5-year risk of 22% decreased to a mere 4.2% chance of recidivism after remaining offense-free for 10-years. These findings suggest that not all high-risk sexual offenders remain high-risk forever, and vary not only in their level of risk for recidivism but also their duration of risk. Considerations such as these bear considerable implications for managing offenders upon community release, as demonstrated by Lussier, Gress, Deslauriers-Varin, and Amirault (2014). The researchers examined the impact of an intensive supervision program in Canada on the risk management of high-risk sexual offenders returning to the community and found that the impact of this supervision varied. They suggested that future studies examine the characteristics of high-risk sexual offenders who are more responsive to intensive supervision versus regular probation. Such endeavors would likely serve to help minimize challenges with community reintegration, as well as lead to a better allocation of resources. Taken together, the findings from the aforementioned studies (Hanson et al., 2014; Woodworth et al., 2013) highlight the complexity and heterogeneity that exists among high-risk sexual offenders. Further, these results draw into question the umbrella labeling of this group and highlights the possible need for subtypes within the designation of "high-risk".

Numerous theoretical and statistically-derived typologies have previously been developed to aid in the understanding, assessment, treatment, and criminal profiling of sexual offenders. For example, sexual offenders have been divided into subtypes on the basis of such variables as victim age, victim relation, offender age, criminal behavior, motivation, risk for reoffending, and degree of violence (e.g., Chu & Thomas, 2010; Ennis, Buro, & Jung, 2014; Groth, 1979; Healey, Beauregard, Beech, & Vettor, 2014; Knight, Warren, Reboussin, & Soley, 1998; Malcolm, Andrews, & Quinsey, 1993; Porter et al., 2000; Rice & Harris, 2002; Robertiello & Terry, 2007; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). It has been proposed that in order to be most useful, criminal typologies need to be clear, parsimonious, comprehensive, and contain mutually exclusive categories – recommendations that many early typologies failed to meet (Gibbons, 1975). Accordingly, there has been an increase in the use of person-centered statistical techniques to empirically derive mutually exclusive typologies of offenders. For example, latent class analysis (LCA) and latent profile analysis (LPA) have been utilized in recent studies to form typologies of sexual burglary (e.g., Pedneault, Harris, & Knight, 2012), sexual impulsivity (e.g., Behnken, Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & DeLisi, 2015), violent sexual offenders (e.g., Healey et al., 2014), female sexual offenders (e.g. Miller, Turner, & Henderson, 2009; Turner, Miller, & Henderson, 2008; Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2011), and crime sites of serial sexual offenders (e.g., Deslauriers-Varin & Beauregard, 2014). However, these methods have yet to be employed to the study of high-risk sexual offenders.

1.1. Aim of study

Although high-risk sexual offenders have been associated with increased violence, number of victims, and risk for sexual reoffending (Levenson, 2004; Lussier et al., 2010), research on this group of offenders is still limited and largely descriptive in nature. The purpose of this study was to address the evident literature gap by developing a typology of high-risk sexual offenders. Specifically, LCA was utilized to explore the heterogeneity of high-risk sexual offenders and uncover subtypes using situational and motivational characteristics of index offenses. Additionally, we sought to examine the relationships between these subtypes and characteristics of the offenders and their previous offending behavior. By developing an empirically-derived typology, our goal was to provide a more refined understanding of high-risk sexual offenders and, in doing so, further inform investigative, therapeutic, and preventative practices.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The sample for this study was composed of offender and offense information for 92 high-risk male sexual offenders within Canada. This sample was obtained from a larger sample used in a previous study by Woodworth et al. (2013). The original sample was obtained by extracting offender information from the Integrated Sexual Predator Information Network (ISPIN) in collaboration with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) E Division's Behavioural Sciences Group (BSG) in British Columbia, Canada. ISPIN is a research-based information network focused on the investigation of sexual offenders. This database contains a record for a portion of the highest-risk sexual offenders in the High Risk Offender Identification program (HROIP); the files of which are the primary source of information used in dangerous offender hearings. As part of ISPIN, offenders' risk levels have been estimated using an assessment template based on tombstone data, actuarial scores, and other research-based risk factors (e.g., mental health).[1] This template generates a total cumulative score with a maximum value of 10, where higher values indicate an increased risk to reoffend. Offenders classified as 7.5 and higher are considered to be the most precarious group of high-risk offenders according to the BSG and this cutoff was employed for inclusion in collecting the original sample.

Information for all high-risk sexual offenders (n = 139) with a score of 7.5 or higher was extracted. To enable LCA, only cases with complete offender information were obtained for the present study, resulting in a final sample of 92 offenders.

2.2. Data collection

Data collection occurred at the RCMP BSG over a one-month period by a graduate student trained extensively in file review and coding. All offender information in the ISPIN records was thoroughly examined and recorded according to a comprehensive coding scheme. Numerous variables assessing offender and offense characteristics were coded.

2.3. Variables

Indicator variables relating to offenders and their index crimes were included in the analysis to capture motivational and situational characteristics. Additionally, a series of covariate analyses were conducted including external variables relating to the offender and previous criminal offenses. These follow-up analyses were conducted to determine the differential influence of these covariates on class membership.

2.3.1. Indicator variables

Following the methods of other researchers (e.g., Healey, Lussier, & Beauregard, 2012; Healey et al., 2014; Pedneault et al., 2012), crime scene indicators pertaining to the index sexual offense were the focus of this study as they have been said to be relatively objective behavioral indicators of offenders' underlying motivation to commit sexual acts and reveal important information about the nature of these offenses. All crime scene variables were coded dichotomously (0 - not present/ 1 - present) and included use of a weapon, use of sadistic violence, and level of knowledge between the victim and offender. These variables were chosen as they have been found to be associated with type of sexual offender in previous studies (e.g., Healey et al., 2014; Pedneault et al., 2012; Woodworth et al., 2013). Level of knowledge between the victim and offender reflected whether the victim was a stranger (i.e., no knowledge) or known to the offender (e.g., friend, family member, or acquaintance). Use of sadistic violence was determined to be present if there was evidence of pleasure taken from violence at the crime scene. Additionally, the presence or absence of sexual paraphilias (i.e., sexual sadism and pedophilia) was included to capture possible motivating influences of the offending behavior. Sexual