

Original Article

Age and sexual assault during robberies

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Abstract

We use data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System to examine the effects of offender and victim age on whether male offenders commit sexual assault while robbing women. Restricting analyses to robberies reveals the offenders' age preferences since it allows one to control for the effects of opportunity. We find that robbers of all ages are most likely to sexually assault women at ages 15–29 years, ages when their reproductive potential is highest. However, in contrast to the idea that rape is a direct adaptation, victims are no more likely to be raped than sexually assaulted at these ages. The age of the offender is also a strong predictor of sexual assault. The likelihood that a robber commits a sexual assault increases from age 12 years until he reaches his early thirties when it begins to decline. This age pattern corresponds, to some extent, to age differences in the male sex drive.

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1. Introduction

Research shows that victims of rape and sexual assault are overwhelmingly young (e.g., Lalumiere, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1983). Thornhill and Palmer (2000) argue that males target young females because of their reproductive potential (see also, e.g., Ellis, 1989; Malamuth, Huppin, & Bryant, 2005; Symons, 1979). Their choice of young females reflects a reproductive strategy that was successful in ancestral history. However, evolutionary psychologists differ as to whether rape is a direct adaptation or a by-product of other adaptations. According to the direct adaptation hypothesis, rape itself was favored by selection because it increased male reproductive success (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Males who raped females increased their likelihood of producing more offspring. As a result, the tendency to rape and target women with the most reproductive potential was encoded in male genes. This adaptation leads them to rape women who are in their years of highest fecundity.

A less controversial argument is that rape and other sexual assaults are by-products of other male psychological

adaptations (Symons, 1979; see also Ellis, 1989; Shields & Shields, 1983; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1983). According to the by-product hypothesis, sex differences in reproductive strategy resulted in a tendency toward promiscuity in males and a tendency toward selectivity in females. While males tend to be indiscriminant, they favor young women because they find them more sexually attractive. Thus, laboratory studies find that heterosexual men show the greatest sexual arousal in response to women between the ages of 18 and 25 years (see Langevin, 1983). Male attraction to young but sexually mature females reflects the association between age and female reproductive potential in ancestral history. From this perspective, male sexuality and standards of female sexual attractiveness are direct adaptations, and sexual assaults on young women are a by-product.

Age patterns, however, may reflect the effects of opportunity (e.g., Kimmel, 2003; Palmer 1991; Travis, 2003). Opportunity is a key factor affecting the risk of crime victimization generally (Felson, 1998). Young people have more contact with offenders because they go out at night more often (e.g., Warr, 1993). In addition, in the early teenage years, they may be more vulnerable because of physical weakness and inexperience. When they become older adults, their physical vulnerability is likely to increase. In this research, we attempt to control for these opportunity

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factors by examining the effects of a female's age on whether she is sexually assaulted during a robbery committed by a male. We also examine whether the robbery offender's age affects the likelihood that he engages in a sexual assault and whether his age affects his age preferences.

A previous study attempted to control for opportunity by examining whether men commit rape during the commission of a robbery (Felson and Krohn, 1990). They used the National Crime Survey (1980–82) to compare the ages of female victims in robbery with the ages of female victims in rapes committed in conjunction with robbery. They found that the mean age of victims of robbery/rape was 27.9, while the mean age of victims of pure robbery was 35.0 years. The 7 year difference was statistically significant. However, the results were based on a small sample (887 robberies), while our analyses is based on over 34,000 robberies. This allows us to examine in detail the age distribution of victims and offenders.

Other research has attempted to control for opportunity by examining whether men commit rape during the commission of a homicide. They found that female homicide victims who had been raped were younger than female homicide victims who had been the victim of theft (Shackelford, 2002; Wilson, Daly, & Scheib, 1997). Also relevant are two studies that compare the age of victims for different crimes. They find that female victims of rape tend to be younger than female victims of homicide, aggravated assault, and property crimes (Ennis, 1967; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1983).

Researchers have paid much less attention to the age of sexual assault offenders. Thornhill and Palmer (2000) suggest that age differences in offending should correspond with age differences in the male sex drive (see also Thornhill & Thornhill, 1992). Thornhill and Thornhill (1983) suggest that “men will be most likely to rape at ages prior to first marriage when competition for females is most intense (p. 148).” These ideas imply that the tendency to commit sexual assault should increase when males reach sexual maturity and that their rates should decline as they age. Young men, however, are more likely to commit crime generally. In fact, Thornhill and Thornhill found that the age distributions for rape, robbery and homicide offenders were similar. They explain the similarity by suggesting that all three crimes reflect sexual competition. Whether this is true or not, the method cannot be used to show that sexual assault is associated with the male sex drive or sexual competition. In addition, it is not clear that the method adequately controls for opportunity factors.

Another important issue is whether older and younger men have different age preferences. From Thornhill and Palmer's perspective, older men and younger men should both prefer young women since both respond to reproductive potential or sexual attractiveness. On the other hand, one may observe age homophily if men are more likely to have contact with women their own age or if older men are more likely than younger men to be attracted to older women.

2. Current study

We examine the ages of victims and offenders of robberies involving male offenders and female victims using data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). We compare robberies that involve a sexual assault and those that do not in order to find out the age preference of sexual assault offenders. Because we are examining robberies, we know that actual contact between the potential sexual assault offender and victim has already been established. We are, to a considerable degree, equalizing opportunities for an offender to sexually assault victims of different ages. Thus, the comparison allows us to control for age-related opportunity factors.

We suspect that, in most instances, the robbery precedes the sexual assault, but whether it does or not should not affect our results. We also suspect that many robberies do not provide an opportunity for a sexual assault since a sexual assault, particularly when it involves rape, takes additional time. This characteristic should reduce the relationships between age and sexual assault. Thus, we view our analyses as providing a conservative test of hypotheses about age preferences.

We first present graphs showing the effects of the age of robbery victims and offenders on the likelihood of a sexual assault. We predict that robbery victims will be most likely to be sexually assaulted when they are at ages of greatest reproductive potential or fecundity. Fecundity refers to the capacity to produce offspring while fertility refers to the actual number of offspring produced. We emphasize fecundity because it is much less likely than fertility to be affected by cultural factors. Fecundity is at its highest level at ages 15–19 years and then begins a steady decline, with substantial declines not occurring until after age 30 years (Mosher & Pratt, 1985).

We recognize that there is an imperfect fit between these fecundity levels, sexual attractiveness, and the risk of sexual assault. First, determining the exact ages at which females became sexually mature in ancestral history is difficult to determine. The median age of menarche across human populations today ranges from about 12.0 to 18.5 years (Ellis, 2004), and there is a delay before ovulation begins. Second, females in modern societies have the means to make themselves appear more sexually attractive; girls can make themselves look older and older women can make themselves look younger. These efforts may alter the age-related risks. Finally, there may be other evolved characteristics that alter the ages of risk, at least in the case of rape. For example, Ellis, Widmayer and Palmer (2009) suggest that offenders target younger victims to secure long-term mates and that women may have evolved counterstrategies to avoid victimization at ages of fecundity. These complications make it difficult to make precise predictions about age-related risk.

We also predict that robbery offenders will be most likely to engage in sexual assault when they are at ages

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