



Child versus peer/adult offenders: A critical review of the juvenile sex offender literature



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ABSTRACT

Sexual offenses are serious crimes and it is believed that adolescents perpetrate 20% of all sexual assaults and 50% of all child sexual abuse (Barbaree & Marshall, 2006). To better understand the etiology of juvenile sexual offending, researchers have explored differences between those who offend children versus those who offend peers/adults. This paper critically reviewed 21 studies that compared juvenile sex offenders who abused children with those who abused peers/adults on a variety of variables including victim, offense, and offender characteristics; psychosocial variables; and predictors and rates of recidivism. Strengths and weaknesses of these studies as well as future directions for the literature are discussed. Common methodological limitations of victim-age based comparisons of juvenile sex offenders included inconsistent definitions, low-powered studies, lack of standardized measures, and recidivism data based solely on conviction rates. Overall, many inconsistent findings limit our ability to give overarching conclusions; however, the research does suggest that not only is it important to examine child and peer/adult offenders, but mixed offenders (i.e., offender with both child and peer victims) as a distinct group need to be included in comparisons as well.

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1. Introduction

Sexual offenses are serious crimes with harmful consequences for the victims. Sexual offenses are defined as a behavior that includes:

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“any sexual interaction with person[s] of any age that is perpetrated [a] against the victim’s will, [b] without consent, or [c] in an aggressive, exploitive, manipulative, or threatening manner” (Ryan, 2010, p. 3). Research, along with the media, has focused much attention on adults who commit sexual offenses. In the past 20 years that attention has also shifted to include minors (i.e., usually boys and girls under the age of 18) who committed sexual offenses that would be considered a crime if they were adults (Barbaree & Marshall, 2006). These individuals are referred to in the literature as juvenile sex offenders.¹ Juvenile sex offenders account for approximately 20% of sexual assaults and as much as 50% of child sexual abuse (Barbaree & Marshall, 2006).

To better understand the etiology of sexual offending, researchers have grouped offenders by distinct characteristics such as sexual offending vs. non-sexual offending. Research has examined comparisons between juvenile sex offenders and juvenile non-sexual offenders to determine whether there are fundamental differences between these two groups, or if both groups are simply engaging in deviant behavior. Seto and Lalumiere (2010) conducted a thorough meta-analysis and found that sexual offending was not simply a delinquent act much like burglary, but rather juvenile sex offenders have distinct differences from juvenile non-sexual offenders. Overall, juvenile sex offenders engaged in less criminal behavior and had fewer delinquent friends compared to non-sexual offenders. This meta-analysis clarified that there are fundamental differences between juvenile sex offenders and non-sexual offenders.

Further research has questioned whether those juvenile sex offenders are also composed of distinct groups, particularly whether there are differences based on the age of the offenders’ victims. To examine victim-age based comparisons, the juvenile sex offender literature has used three different definitions (see Table 1 for complete list of definitions included in this review) including: *age only definitions* in which child offenders are defined only by the age of their victims (e.g., victim is “age 11 or below”, Hsu & Starzynski, 1990, p. 25), *age discrepancy only definitions* in which child offenders are defined only the difference between their age and their victims age (e.g., victim is “at least four years younger than offender”, Fanniff & Kolko, 2012, p. 240), and *age as well as age discrepancy definitions* which use both a maximum age as well as a difference between ages to define child or peer offenders (e.g., “victims under 12 years old and 3 years younger than the offender”, Aebi, Vogt, Plattner, Steinhausen, & Bessler, 2012, p. 269).

Skubic-Kemper and Kistner (2007) conducted a study to empirically test whether the classification criteria of child and peer offenders affected findings. They examined six different classification criteria, two age only-criteria (e.g., victims less than 10 years old), two age discrepancy only (e.g., four years younger than the offender), and two age and age discrepancy criteria (e.g., less than 10 years old and four years younger than the offender). They found that 28% of the offenders changed classification groups (i.e., child or peer offender) when the criteria was changed. They also noted that although 28% changed groups, they tended to only change once even though there was six different types of classifications. Skubic-Kemper and Kistner concluded that inconsistencies in definitions may not be very influential in regards to findings (i.e., a participant classified as a child offender in one study is likely to also be classified as a child offender in a second study). Therefore, while consistent definitions are important for the literature, they may be less influential than previous believed.

The adult sex offender literature has explored these differences with child molesters and rapists (i.e., offenders who perpetrated against adults) and found fundamental differences. For example, Jespersen, Lalumiere, and Seto (2009) used meta-analytic techniques and found that adult child molesters were more likely than adult rapists to have a history of sexual abuse. In contrast, adult rapists were more likely

than child molesters to have been a victim of physical abuse. The 21 articles reviewed in this paper extended the findings in the adult sex literature to include comparison of juvenile sex offenders based on victim age.

2. Procedure and purpose

The purpose of this review is to critically examine the literature comparing male juvenile sex offenders based upon the age of their victims. Similar to the adult sex offender literature, juvenile sex offenders have been dichotomized into either child offenders or peer/adult offenders. These two groups of offenders were compared on a variety of variables including offense, victim, and offender characteristics; psychosocial variables, and predictors and rates of recidivism.

Relevant studies for this review were found by exploring the following databases: PsychInfo, PsychArticles, MedLine, and Google Scholar for key terms such as “peer offender”, “child offender”, “adolescent sex offender”, “juvenile sex offender”, “victim age”, “child molester”, and “rapist”. A study was included in this critical review if it (a) was an empirical article, (b) was written in English, (c) was published in a peer-reviewed journal, (d) examined adolescent males who were charged, or adjudicated for committing a sexual offense, and (e) directly compared “child offenders” and “peer offenders” using statistical analyses (see Table 1 for definitions by study).² In contrast, studies were excluded if they examined either child offenders or peer offenders, but did not compare the two groups. In addition, no studies examined female juvenile sex offenders or compared juvenile and adult sexual offenders based on victim age, therefore all studies including in this review studied only male juvenile sex offenders.

Based upon the above stated inclusion and exclusion criteria, 21 studies were identified (see Table 2 for study characteristics). Articles were then organized based on variables examined (e.g., offense and victim characteristics). Within variable sub-sections, studies not yet reviewed and critiqued were presented chronologically followed by previously reviewed and critiques studies. Most studies examined multiple variable categories and therefore were discussed in multiple sections. The vast majority of these studies reported offense and victim characteristics and therefore most studies were thoroughly described and reviewed in these sections. Each article was reviewed for threats to internal, external, statistical conclusion, and construct validity (Kazdin, 2003). Lastly, overall conclusions including common limitations were discussed as well as future directions for the literature.

3. Summary and critical review of the literature

3.1. Offense and victim variables

The following sections review articles that examined characteristics of the offense including type and location, amount of force, and whether alcohol/drugs and weapons were used. Victim characteristics described in this section include gender of the victim and relationship of the victim to the offender.

3.1.1. Offense characteristics

In an early study, Richardson, Kelly, Bhate, and Graham (1997) reviewed the records of 100 male adolescents (ages 11–18 years) from the United Kingdom and divided the sample into four independent groups: *incest* (i.e., “[those] who sexually abused their siblings, including step and half-siblings”, p. 244; $n = 20$), *child* (i.e., “[those] who had sexually abused unrelated or extended-family younger children”, p. 244; $n = 31$), *peer* (i.e., “[those] who had sexually abused peer-aged or older victims”, p. 244; $n = 24$), and *mixed offenders* (i.e.,

¹ The terms juvenile and adolescent have been used interchangeably when describing sexual offenders who were under the age of 18 at the time of the offense. Throughout this paper they will be referred to as juvenile sex offenders.

² In all 21 studies, peer offenders were defined as anyone who offended against a peer or adult (See Table 1 for definitions). For the sake of conciseness these individuals will be referred to as peer offenders throughout this paper.

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