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Correlates of Sex Offender and Offense Traits by Victim Age

ABSTRACT: The authors studied offender, offense, and victim characteristics according to victim age cohort among a sample of over 800 incarcerated sex offenders. Their findings were somewhat different from those previously reported, and suggest that rapists of adults were more psychopathic, sexual assailants against adolescents appeared to be more typical family men, and child molesters were more opportunistic chronic sex offenders. The authors believe their findings begin to shed light on the nature of sex crimes committed against victims of different age.

Victim age is of particular importance in understanding sex crimes [1]. Whether it be the criminal justice system, which differentiates between sexual assaults against children (for example, child molestation) and those against adults (for example, rape), or studies of physiological sexual arousal (See Refs. 2, 3, 4 for example), victim age must be viewed as a major dimension in sexual victimization.

From this perspective, we can identify three classes of offender according to victim age: those who sexually assault prepubescent children, those who target children between puberty and late adolescence, and victimizers of adults. Offenders against each age group have been thought to have certain distinct characteristics.

Those who sexually assault children are thought to have deficient social skills [5] and to display a dissolution of moral structures [6]. Child molesters most often offend in their residence [7] and may have a wider intergroup variability in their use of violence [1]. Children are thought to be more vulnerable or available [5,6] to sexual assault, and to offer little or no resistance [7].

Child molesters tend to have a more even age distribution than rapists of adults [8,9], who are usually under 30 years of age. Heterosexual child molesters have been described as "dull, alcoholic and asocial" [10], less often married [11], or less likely to have cohabited

for at least one year [8] than rapists of adults. However, the offender's level of educational attainment and work history [8,10,11], and the nature of the offender's juvenile and adult criminal records [8,9,10,12] have a more inconsistent and poorly understood contribution to the differences between sexual assailants of children and adults. Compared with child molesters, rapists seem to be a heterogeneous group that is more difficult to characterize.

Further complicating these descriptions is the group of sexual offenders against minors between puberty and adulthood. Such criminals have been called "hebephiles" [1], and are thought by Gebhard et al. [10] to be "even more psychopathic than aggressors against adult women or female children." Such offenders have been characterized as "amoral" or as "subcultural" delinquents who have been found to have the highest levels of juvenile delinquency, the earliest onset of sexual offending, the greatest extent of drug use, and the most unstable marriages of any sex-offender group. Knight et al. [1] speculated this greater psychopathic quality may in part result from this group's relatively young age.

This somewhat unclear view of sex offenders is probably the result of diverse methodologies, sample populations, and offense definition. In an effort to get a more coherent picture of this problem, we decided to examine a wide range of offender, victim and offense variables contained in a data base derived from a large group of Missouri sex offenders.

Methods

Missouri is unique in having a mandatory, corrections based treatment program applicable to all incarcerated sex offenders. In the beginning of their eligibility for this program, inmates are interviewed by a caseworker who completes the program's Schedule of Inquiry (SOI). The SOI contains 158 specific items concerning the offender's sociodemographic attributes, history of sexual and nonsexual crime(s), detailed description of the current sex offense(s), and victim characteristics (a copy of the SOI and detailed description of its variables is available from Dr. Pierson).

Information gathered for the SOI is routinely checked against other sources including the police report, presentence investigation, and others. Discrepancies between a subject's statement(s) and the objective source(s) are reconciled in favor of the objective source(s). Following the interview, the caseworker also rates the accuracy of the information obtained from the subject as compared to the evidence from the objective source(s).

Unfortunately, all sex offenders do not have SOIs. Some eligible inmates are not sufficiently close to their release dates to begin the program; others—especially those having very short sentences—cannot participate for logistical reasons, so their program requirement is waived. And, six to eight percent of all incarcerated sex offenders simply refuse program participation. Although our sample is a subset of all sex offenders, our inspection of demographic indicators indicated the SOI group adequately represents the population of confined sex offenders in Missouri.

Our sample comprises 827 men who are serving or have served felony confinements for their sex crimes. Entries for 19 subjects had no specified victim age, so subsequent analysis was conducted upon the data from 808 inmates.

Of this number, 270 (33.4% of the valid cases) had their youngest victim under age ten (Group 1); 347 (42.9%) had their youngest victim between ages 10 and 15 years (Group 2); and, 191 (23.6%) committed their current offense against victim(s) of age 16 years or older (Group 3). These somewhat arbitrary victim-age cohorts were chosen to reflect what we thoughtfully believed to be more clearly represented the psychological and physiological epochs of childhood (under age ten years), the broad landscape of puberty (ages 10 through 15 years), and adulthood (16 years and older). We acknowledge that other, equally reasonable victim-age cohort schemes could have been used to examine our population. We have attempted to describe our study population previously [13].

We then conducted a linear regression of each variable against victim age Group 1, 2, or 3. This method of analysis was selected rather than log-linear analysis because most of our independent variables were nondichotomous. A value of $P < 0.005$ was used for the level of statistical significance.

Results

Table 1 displays offender characteristics correlated with victim age group; Table 2 shows offense traits by victim age group; and, Table 3 illustrates victim characteristics by age group. Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage distributions of cases by victim

TABLE 1—*Selected offender characteristics and victim age.*

Characteristics	Correlation with Victim Age	P(alpha)[a]	n
Relationship to victim (scale: immediate family to stranger)	−.409	<.001	793
Age at time of offense	−.150	<.001	795
Offender white	−.239	<.001	783
Offender black	+.216	<.001	783
Never married	+.146	<.001	784
Duration of first marriage	−.156	<.001	748
Number of children	−.110	.002	780
Age at first felony conviction (whether current or previous)	−.158	<.001	727
Previous felony conviction for property crime	+.133	<.001	808
Number of prison violations (current sex offense)	+.217	<.001	799
Age at prison commitment (current sex offense)	−.159	<.001	799
Alpha I (Quay "high heavy") Score	+.265	<.001	535
No conviction for nonsexual felony	−.149	<.001	808

[a]Regression based significance test.

TABLE 2—*Selected offense characteristics and victim age.*

Characteristic	Correlation with Victim Age	P(alpha)	n
Current offense (CO): Vaginal Intercourse	+.309	<.001	808
CO: weapon involved	+.263	<.001	808
CO: manipulation breast/vagina ("Fondling")	−.327	<.001	808
CO: degree of violence (scale: none +)	+.378	<.001	805
CO: offense location (scale: away from home to at home)	−.281	<.001	759
CO: offense at night	+.110	.005	657
CO: injury to victim (scale: none +)	+.111	.002	808

TABLE 3—*Selected victim characteristics and victim age.*

Characteristics	Correlation with Victim Age	P(alpha)	m
Relationship to offender[a] (scale: immediate family to stranger)	−.409	<.001	793
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	−.182	<.001	803
Degree of victim resistance (scale: none +)	+.233	<.001	645
Victim age (see Table 1)			

[a]Same item as in Table 1.

TABLE 4—*Distribution of victim age.*

Victim age	N	Percent
0–4	50	6.2
5–9	220	27.2
10–12	151	18.7
13–15	196	24.3
16–17	62	7.7
18–20	36	4.5
21–22	22	2.7
23–25	15	1.9
26–30	22	2.7
31–40	18	2.2
41+	16	2.0

age, Table 5 shows similar distributions by offender relationship to victim, and Table 6 shows such distributions by offender age at the time of the offense.

Offenders in Group 3 (rapists of adults) were significantly more likely than other groups to be single/never married, non-white, younger, and have a background of convictions for non-sex crimes. These offenders used the most violence as evidenced by verified injuries among their current victims, their use of weapons, and overall degree of violence. They significantly more often attacked late in the day, at an outdoor location away from the victim's home, and their crime was of relatively brief duration, but involved vaginal penetration.

Group 3's victims were significantly more often strangers or casual acquaintances who resisted their assailant. Once confined, this group of criminals was significantly more likely classified as a "Heavy" type of offender according to the Quay internal classification system [14] (that is, aggressive, victimizing, and inclined to associate with violent or

TABLE 5—*Offender relationship to victim.*

Relationship	N	Percent
Complete stranger	109	13.6
Casual acquaintance	133	16.6
Friend/close acquaintance	218	27.2
Blood relative	171	21.3
Immediate family	171	21.3

TABLE 6—*Offender age at time of the offense.*

Offender Age	N	Percent
<18 years	51	6.3
18–22	152	18.7
23–25	83	10.2
26–30	158	19.5
31–35	123	15.1
36–40	97	11.9
>41	148	18.2

repeat offenders). Group 3 offenders committed significantly far more institutional violations than the other Groups.

Somewhat surprisingly, we found that victimizers of adolescents (Group 2) were significantly *most* likely to pick females as victims, were even more likely to be white than the child molesters, and were the *most* likely to be blood relatives of their victims. Group 2 inmates had been married the most number of times with their first marriage lasting longest among the first marriages of all three groups, had the greatest average number of natural children, and were the oldest at first felony conviction.

Those who sexually assaulted children (Group 1) had a significantly greater number of prior convictions for sex crimes. While there are several possible explanations for this finding, it at least suggests this was part of an ongoing pattern of sexual offending. They were the second most likely to offend against their own children or children in their care. Although a majority of their victims were female, this group had the largest proportion of male victims among the three study groups. And, their crimes mostly involved fondling or manipulation of breasts, genitals, or both, rather than vaginal penetration or oral sex.

Discussion

Our findings confirm the utility of approaching the study of sex offending by looking at victim age cohort. From our work, an understanding begins to emerge of the typical offender against victims from certain age cohorts.

For example, rapists of adults appear to be the most antisocial: they were unmarried, young, had a record of prior nonsex offense convictions, and their index sex crimes seemed to have been brief acts of impersonal violence. They were the most trouble under confinement. For these offenders, sexual assaults seem to represent a continuation and elaboration of their overall criminal behavior rather than a preferred pattern of crime.

Those who sexually assaulted adolescents were quite different. They appeared to have been more typical "family men," having had more stable marriages, more children, and offending against a mixed group of victims from inside and outside their immediate families. We speculate that these sex offenders were least suspected of such behavior because of their veneer of normalcy. Their victims gave little resistance, so perhaps these criminals lured their victims into the crime by exploiting both adolescent naiveté and the ever shifting but delicate balance of energy for exploration and risk taking.

Child molesters seem to be chronic sex offenders, having more previous sex-offense convictions. Their crimes involved both male and female victims with whom the offender was related by blood. They most often fondled their victims rather than affected sexual penetration. We believe this is most likely because their victims were physically smaller, and contact between victim and criminal usually occurred in more familiar settings. We are inclined to believe these features combine to permit child-molesters to enjoy a longer-lived criminal career of many more offenses with a very low detection or reporting rate because fondling is less likely to leave detectable physical injuries, sometimes can be

interpreted in an ambiguous manner, can be easily done on the sly at home against trusting children, and the victims are often greeted with skepticism upon reporting the assaults.

Some treatment implications might be drawn from our findings. By this, we do not intend to imply that treatment decisions be made as a function of victim age alone. Rather, we believe that our findings underscore victim age as an important feature among several to consider when selecting appropriate treatment.

Our population of rapists of adults tends to resemble general population inmates or "ordinary" criminals, a finding at odds with some of those reported in the literature [1,8,10,11]. This suggests rehabilitation or treatment efforts might more profitably be directed toward these offenders' underlying sociopathy, criminality, or violence. Such treatment may call for a therapy or management approach that targets the offender's criminal behavior rather than treating a presumed psychosexual disorder or their specific attitudes toward women. In contrast, child molesters differ markedly from general population inmates, and an intensive individualized approach to their treatment might be more effective.

Those who sexually assaulted adolescents also contrasted with some literature findings [1,10], and prove to be the most difficult to characterize. We caution that our findings for this group might be a function of our age cohort classification method. Regardless, we speculate that this group is comprised of a highly heterogeneous population that may contain several pure forms including "ephebophiliacs" (sexual abusers of barely pubescent teenagers—who more closely resemble pedophiles), "hebephiles" (sexual abusers of victims whose ages are several years beyond puberty—who more closely resemble rapists of adults), and a mixture of "other" types. We believe that rehabilitation or treatment of offenders in this diverse group would prove to be the most difficult, and likely require an individualized assessment and treatment drawing from methods for treating both rapists and pedophiles. We also believe that completely novel treatment approaches must be explored for this group. This group clearly deserves more thorough investigation.

In conclusion, the present study has glimpsed at the differences of sex offenders according to their victim's ages. It suggests that those who sexually assault victims within certain age-groups may have different motivations, different methods of committing their crimes, and may exploit different age-specific victim vulnerabilities. It also suggests that differential treatment or intensive management methods, some of which might be quite innovative, must be developed and implemented for those who offend against victims of different ages. An example of such an innovative approach can be found in relapse prevention [15], a method proving to be highly impressive in the treatment of selected sex offenders [16]. More research is clearly necessary to understand these sex offenders and their treatment or management needs more fully.

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