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Juvenile Sex Offenders

CHANTAL VAN DEN BERG

Introduction

The number of studies on juvenile sexual offending has grown considerably in recent years. Most of these studies focused on reexamining established knowledge about general offender samples, since sexual offenders are thought of as different from the general offender population. It is assumed that the cause of sexual offending is some type of illness resulting from biological and psychological deficits, therefore the sexual offender will continue sexual offending under the influence of this illness. This belief is reflected in special criminal justice responses for sexual offenders, both juveniles and adults. Thus, broadly accepted implications within the criminological field for general samples are not thought of as self-evident for the (juvenile) sexual offenders (Smallbone, 2006). This causes the empirical research on juvenile sex offenders still to seem limited and mostly focused on prevalence, recidivism, risk factors, and risk assessment.

The purpose of this entry is to summarize empirical literature concerning juvenile sex offenders on prevalence, theory development, risk factors and risk assessment, criminal career research, and typologies.

Only a small percentage of all sexual offending is committed by females (both adults and juveniles). Therefore, most studies on juvenile sex offenders are focused on males. The literature summarized in this entry will comprise only studies on male juvenile sex offenders.

Definition

Juvenile sex offenders are youths who have committed a sexual offense. However, within the empirical literature, a distinction is often made between juvenile sex offenders and adolescent sexual offenders, and these terms are

used interchangeably. Strictly, adolescent sexual offenders have already reached puberty when the sexual offense took place, whereas juvenile sex offenders may not yet have reached puberty, even if they are criminally responsible (Barbaree and Marshall, 2006).

Prevalence

A significant proportion of all sexual offenses are committed by juveniles. Estimations have been made that indicate that between 20% and 50% of all sexual offenses are committed by juveniles. Birth cohort studies revealed that 1.5% of the population of boys had at least one police contact for sexual offending, mostly misdemeanors (Zimring, Piquero, and Jennings, 2007). If only felony sexual offenses were included, the prevalence rate in the birth cohort studies varied between 0.3% and 0.5%. These numbers indicate that juvenile sex offending is actually a very rare offense.

However, establishing the exact amount (prevalence and volume) of sexual offending is difficult. The known offenses are often based on registered data and are addressed by the scientific community as “just the tip of the iceberg,” since there is a supposedly high to very high “dark number” in sexual offending, in other words, a high number of committed sexual offenses are never reported to the police. All offense types have a dark number, but for sexual offending this number is possibly much higher for the following reasons: first, the chances of the offender and victim being acquainted are high, resulting in victims being less willing to report the offense; second, the sexual nature of the offense itself may also decrease willingness to report, as victims often feel shame or guilt; and finally, low chances of clearance or “solving the sexual abuse” also result in a limited number of reports to the police.

To avoid a dark number, scientists often turn to using self-reported prevalence. Recently, this has been done for sexual offending with older youths (between 17 and 20 years old). A study by Kjellgren et al. (2010) found that 5% of the respondents reported sexually coercive behavior. This percentage is higher than the 1.5% from the

official registration data, underlining the dark number in official registration data.

Theories on Juvenile Sexual Offending

With the increase in scientific research on sexual offending, theory development has also increased considerably in recent years. The most prominent theories are multifactorial, combining biological, psychological, and environmental explanations for the onset and continuation of sexual offending (Ward and Beech, 2008). Most of these theories have been developed specifically for adults or adult child abusers; however, some may also be applicable to juvenile sexual offending. The theories that could also be used to explain juvenile sexual offending are those that adopt a developmental framework, stressing that adult sexual offending can be explained through adverse events that occurred in childhood [for instance, poor parenting, (sexual) abuse, neglect]. These events are thought also to influence the period after childhood and therefore explain juvenile sexual offending.

Marshall and Barbaree (1990) proposed a theoretical model consisting of a developmental pathway of sexual abuse starting from childhood. If a child experiences abuse or rejection, this can result in insecure attachment and loneliness, causing difficulties in forming social relationships with peers. The child may then develop a lack of self-confidence and a negative self-image (O'Reilly and Carr, 2006). This "syndrome of social disability," as Barbaree, Marshall, and McCormick (1998) called it, may lead to the development of abusive sexual behavior in adolescence and adulthood. Given that the "syndrome of social disability" is likely to be static over time and be caused by childhood trauma that is difficult to repair, continuation of sexual offending from adolescence to adulthood is likely. Hence this theory implicitly assumes continuation of sexual offending, as the risk factors are present in an individual from childhood through to adulthood.

Ward and Siegert (2002) described four pathways that may lead to sexual offending against a child, but the model does not explain persistence in child sexual abuse. The four pathways are based on the distinctive and interacting psychological

mechanisms found in adult child abusers: intimacy and social skills deficits, distorted sexual scripts, emotional dysregulation, and cognitive distortions. For juvenile sexual offenders, the authors assumed that the juvenile probably has been diagnosed with conduct disorder in early childhood. As a result, these juveniles have low impulse control that will lead to criminal behavior, including adult and juvenile sexual offending (O'Reilly and Carr, 2006). Therefore, this theory implies that nonsexual criminal behavior and sexual offending share similar developmental aspects and risk factors.

Becker and Kaplan (1988) developed the only model (to the present author's knowledge) that describes three postsexual offending pathways for adolescents. The first pathway is that of desistance or discontinued offending. The second pathway specifically consists of continued sexual offending due to a paraphilic sexual interest. The offenders in this group constitute a homogeneous group with a particular psychological disorder as a risk factor. The third pathway consists of a continued and diverse criminal career in nonsexual and sexual crime. This pathway emphasizes the risk of a possible antisocial nature of some juvenile sexual offenders. The model of Becker and Kaplan (1988) emphasizes the heterogeneity within juvenile sex offenders, with three pathways that are quite distinct and influenced by specific risk factors.

Concluding, these theories state that the causes of sexual offending might be the so-called "syndrome of social disability," conduct disorder and other psychological deficits, and family and social environmental influences. Most of these factors are stable over the life course and already present in childhood, underlining the view of continued sexual offending. However, most of these risk factors stated by the theories are also assumed for nonsexual criminal behavior.

Risk Factors

Whereas most theories on juvenile sexual offending use general antisocial risk factors and also sex offender-specific risk factors to explain the onset and continuation of sexual offending, clinical practice and research use a more specific framework to explain juvenile sexual offending.

Within the clinical risk factor literature, it is assumed that traits associated with general (i.e., nonsexual) offending do not entirely explain sexual offending. This implies that established tools, treatments, and models of juvenile criminal behavior might not be appropriate for juvenile sex offenders.

Empirically, juvenile sex offenders have indeed been found to differ on risk factors from nonsexual offenders in three important domains. First, psychological and psychiatric disorders are more prominent in juvenile sex offenders. In a large meta-analysis by Seto and Lalumière (2010) examining 59 studies comparing adolescent sex offenders with adolescent nonsex offenders, it was found that juvenile sex offenders had a higher prevalence of personality problems, depression, and anxiety. Second, the role of sexual abuse history, atypical sexual interests, and psychosexual development is often emphasized. Seto and Lalumière (2010) found that juvenile sex offenders differed significantly from other offenders regarding these aspects. They had been sexually abused more often and had atypical sexual interests and more psychosexual developmental problems. Third, evidence has been found for a theoretical mechanism often hypothesized to explain sexual offending, namely social incompetence or disability. Van Wijk et al. (2005) found that social skills in juvenile sex offenders were less developed than those in juvenile nonsex offenders. Seto and Lalumière (2010) found a similar pattern of less developed social skills in juvenile sex offenders compared with juvenile nonsex offenders. Hence more psychological and psychiatric disorders, atypical sexual interests and psychosexual developmental problems, and social incompetence are risk factors that distinguish juvenile sex offenders from juvenile nonsex offenders.

However, Seto and Lalumière (2010) found that juvenile sex offenders also share risk factors with juvenile non-sex offenders that explain general offending, such as antisocial attitudes and beliefs. This could explain why juvenile sex offenders, in addition to involvement in sexual offending, also exhibit general criminal behavior.

The assumption within the clinical risk factor literature that traits associated with general criminal behavior do not entirely explain sexual offending is reflected in the risk assessment

instruments designed to predict sexual reoffending. For example, the Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol-II (J-SOAP-II) includes, in addition to sex offender-specific risk factors, also traits such as antisocial behavior, impulsive behavior, and school and conduct problems (Prentky and Righthand, 2003). The Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Sexual Offence Recidivism (ERASOR), a short-term risk assessment (i.e., a maximum of a 1-year risk assessment), contains scales on deviant preoccupations and attitudes, antisocial orientation, and poor self-regulation (Worling and Cruwen, 2000). In a literature review by Hempel et al. (2013), these two instruments (J-SOAP-II and ERASOR) were found to be the most accurate in predicting short-term sexual recidivism among juveniles, although their predictive validity is still insufficient to predict accurately long-term (sexual) recidivism in juvenile sex offenders. The authors emphasized that this is due to the rapid psychological and social changes taking place over the life course of juveniles, as various risk factors are assumed to influence different developmental stage in life differently.

Criminal Career

Although the theories on juvenile sexual offending and the risk factors for continued sexual offending found in clinical research give some indication of how juvenile sexual offending develops and possibly continues, it does not provide a clear description of the offending behavior over time. A developmental criminological perspective can help describe and explain the criminal behavior of juvenile sex offenders over time. This perspective or criminal career research focuses on why and when juvenile sex offenders start to offend, when they stop or desist, and what happens in between. Until recently, this area of research has been underdeveloped – most studies on offending by juvenile sex offenders focused on sexual recidivism and not on the entire criminal career (including all types of offenses) over the life course (Lussier and Blokland, 2014). Follow-up periods in these studies have typically been short and different definitions of reoffending were often used, such as conviction, arrest, or self-report data.

The empirical evidence on reoffending rates suggests that a substantial number of juvenile sex offenders commit a new sex offense after the initial sexual offense. However, the chances of nonsexual reoffending are substantially higher than those of sexual reoffending. In an extensive review of 63 data sets examining 11,219 juvenile sex offenders over an average follow-up period of 59.4 months, Caldwell (2010) found a mean sexual reoffending rate of 7%, while the mean general reoffending rate was 43.4%. Other studies also found that general criminal reoffending rates were higher than rates for sexual recidivism in juvenile sex offenders. However, almost all recidivism studies looked at samples of juvenile sex offenders convicted for the more serious types of sexual offenses (felonies). An exception is the study by Zimring et al. (2009), which examined a large community-based sample. This study also found that juveniles convicted for a sexual offense (both misdemeanor and felony sexual offenses) committed mainly nonsexual offenses. In addition, this study also revealed that while they had a low sexual recidivism rate in adolescence, continued sex offending was even more unlikely in adulthood. Overall, it appears that a juvenile sex offense is not the precursor of adult sexual offending, since recidivism studies indicate ~~only~~ limited specialization and criminal diversity is apparent from these.

As stated, these studies did not focus on the entire criminal career development of juvenile sex offenders. Only recently have a number of studies looked into the entire criminal career of juvenile sex offenders, focusing on persistence, versatility in offending, and desistance from (sexual) offending across the life course. Studies on criminal career patterns revealed that discontinuity in sexual offending seemed normative for most juvenile sex offenders (e.g., Lussier and Blokland, 2014; Van den Berg, Bijleveld, and Hendriks, 2017). Eventually, all juvenile sex offenders desist from offending at various rates, although the mechanisms responsible for the desistance remain an understudied domain. In a bid to shed more light on desistance, researchers recently employed the life-course criminological perspective to examine whether societal development (i.e., finding employment, marriage, and becoming a parent) was associated with a decline in offending by juvenile sex offenders. So far, evidence has been

found only for a declining effect of employment on all offending by juvenile sex offenders (Van den Berg, Bijleveld, and Hendriks, 2017).

Only small groups of juvenile sexual offenders were found to continue sexual offending in early adulthood. For those who persist with sexual reoffending, it was found that aside from sexual offending they also commit other types of offenses over time. This indicates that the sexual recidivists appear to be overall active antisocial offenders (Van den Berg, Bijleveld, and Hendriks, 2017).

In sum, the criminal career literature found low but elevated sexual reoffending rates and higher chances of general criminal recidivism. Moreover, juvenile sexual offending was seldom found to be a precursor for adult sexual offending. However, some evidence has been found that there may be a small subgroup that does continue sexual offending. One explanation that can be drawn from these findings may therefore be that there is heterogeneity within the group of juvenile sex offenders, with some offenders desisting from all offending, some continuing sexual offending, and others following a more antisocial criminal career.

Typology

Current knowledge indeed asserts that juvenile sex offenders do not constitute a homogeneous group, but that there are subgroups. These subgroups have different etiologies, risk profiles, and motivational and situational precursors, which are possibly associated with different adult criminal career outcomes. Many typologies have been proposed based on personality profiles, offending history, underlying motivation for the sex offense, and offending characteristics. However, two typologies have received more consideration in empirical research: the first is based on victim age (child abusers versus peer abusers) and the second distinguishes between individuals who committed the offense alone or with more than one co-offender (solo offenders versus group offenders). Empirically, these subtypes have been found to differ in personality, psychological, and environmental characteristics.

Theoretically, it has been argued that all juvenile sex offenders fit into two categories: those who abused a child (child abusers) and those who abused a peer or adult (peer abuser). These

types are found to differ not only in offending characteristics but also in personality profiles. For example, Hunter et al. (2003) concluded that child abusers were lacking in social skills and low levels of self-esteem compared with peer abusers. Gunby and Woodhams (2010) found similar results, as the child abusers in their sample experienced greater deficits in self-esteem and social isolation. Also, the prevalence of disorders (e.g., pervasive developmental disorders) has been reported to be highest amongst those who had abused children (Hendriks, 2006). Furthermore, those who abused a child were found to be more specialized offenders, who used less physical violence during the offense and were more often acquainted with their victim (Hendriks, 2006). The recidivism risk was also studied. However, the results were inconclusive: some studies found a significantly higher rate of sexual recidivism for child abusers (Hagan et al., 2001) whereas other studies found no difference between the recidivism risk for child abusers and peer abusers (Van den Berg, Bijleveld, and Hendriks, 2017).

The second classification is based on the finding that a substantial number of all juvenile offenses are committed in a group. Therefore, in all likelihood juvenile sex offending also often occurs in a group dynamic context under group pressure. Several studies examined the difference between sex offenders who committed the offense without another offender present (solo sex offenders) and sex offenders who committed the offense with at least one co-offender (group offenders). Recent studies found that group offenders had relatively normative personality profiles, although school achievement and intelligence were often below average. Furthermore, group offenders had less sexual offending in their criminal history than solo offenders (Bijleveld et al., 2007).

Hendriks (2006) combined the two typologies into three distinct groups of juvenile sex offenders: those who sexually abused a child, those who sexually abuse a peer or older victim, and group sex offenders. Empirical evidence found that these three groups differ meaningfully in offending characteristics, personality profiles, and recidivism rates. However, Van den Berg (2015) found this typology to be limited in explaining, describing, and predicting the juvenile sex offenders' criminal careers. The question therefore remains of whether the typologies that

were found to be meaningful and interpretable when these offenders were juveniles have any bearing on these men's adult criminal careers.

SEE ALSO: Delinquency; Developmental Theories; General Theories of Crime and Delinquency; Life-Course Theories; Sexual Abuse; Violent Crimes

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ABSTRACT

This entry gives an overview of juvenile sex offenders by summarizing empirical literature on prevalence, theory development, risk factors, criminal career research, and typologies. Overall, the empirical research on juvenile sexual offending is limited; only recently has the subject gained the interest of the scientific community. Theory development has largely been influenced by concepts and theories used to study adult sex offending. Recidivism studies found that sexual recidivism rates are low, yet somewhat elevated compared with nonsexual offenders, the chances of nonsexual reoffending were found to be substantially higher. The developmental criminological perspective revealed that juvenile sex offenders were unlikely to become adult sex offenders. Risk factors associated with sexual offending were found to be specific traits, such as atypical sexual interests, and also traits associated with nonsexual offending. Additionally, several juvenile sex offender typologies are described.

KEYWORDS

adolescent development; delinquency; developmental criminology; juvenile sex offenders; risk factors

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chantal van den Berg is currently employed as a lecturer in the VU School of Criminology at the VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her research interests include the study of long-term criminal careers of juvenile sex offenders and their transition into adulthood, in terms of labor market outcomes, romantic relationships, and parenthood.