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Extrafamilial Child Abuse: An Analysis of Briefs of Evidence to Investigate Relationships between Perpetrator and Victim Characteristics

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Abstract

Extrafamilial perpetrators are responsible for just over 50% of all child sexual abuse. To understand and prevent such crimes, it is useful to explore patterns of offending particularly aspects that may have facilitated access to children and subsequent exploitation. In the current study, data relating to 721 incidents of child sexual abuse committed by 93 extrafamilial perpetrators against 237 victims were obtained from Crown briefs of evidence. The briefs were prepared between 1997 and 2004 by members of the Sexual Crimes Squad, Victoria Police. Statements by the victims and the transcripts of interview with the perpetrators were the primary source of information in the dataset. A system of classification was developed to reveal characteristics and dynamics useful to understanding and dealing with extrafamilial child sexual abuse. Results supported the view that age and gender of victim and the type of relationship that existed between victim and perpetrator are associated. Offence behaviours were also associated with victim gender and with the type of relationship that existed between perpetrator and victim (e.g., authority, stranger, friendship).

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a repugnant act, socially, physically and emotionally. It impacts on male and female children of all ages from infancy to adolescence. Child sexual abuse may be perpetrated by the proverbial stranger in a trench coat lurking in places where children are to be found. However, most victims are abused by someone they know (intrafamilial and extrafamilial perpetrators), involving a gross breach of trust and power and a violation of the relationship.

In the first national retrospective survey of child sexual abuse in Australia (Fleming, 1997), 48% of the offences were intrafamilial and 52% were extrafamilial offences. International research has shown that extrafamilial perpetrators are responsible for a large proportion of all child sexual abuse (Boelen, 2000; Fischer & McDonald, 1998; Russell, 1983). In particular, a small number of extrafamilial perpetrators are responsible for large numbers of victims. Accordingly, many perpetrators have unique opportunities to gain access to children via the perpetrator-victim relationship. In a thorough literature review of international epidemiological studies on child sexual abuse, Finkelhor (1994) revealed that intrafamilial abuse was more common for females. On the other hand, males were the predominant victims of extrafamilial offenders in more than 75% of the countries that were studied.

Victim Age and Gender

Research into the selection of victims has shown that a perpetrator’s sexual orientation is an important determinant in the selection of the age and gender of the victim (Lanning, 1986; Marshall, Barbaree, & Butt, 1988). Sjostedt, Kangstron, Sturisdson, & Grann, (2004) found that victim choice was highly stable, in particular with respect to male victims. However, Prentky, Knight and Lee (1997) found that victim gender lacked predictive power with respect to recidivism among extrafamilial child molesters. Other findings have revealed that the selection of males and extrafamilial victims are consistent predictors of recidivism (Craig, Browne, Stringer, & Beech, 2005).

Guay, Proulx, Cusson, & Ouimet, (2001) examined the stability and pattern of sexual offending by classifying perpetrators according to the age and gender of their victims. Perpetrators who targeted pre-pubertal victims (paedophiles) and adult victims (rapists) remained stable in their choice of victim age over a sequence of offences. Perpetrators who targeted pubertal victims (hebephiles) were less stable. The majority of perpetrators remained stable in their choice of victim gender. Only 10% of the offenders chose both genders over the sequence of their offending.

Perpetrator-Victim Relationship

Persons known to the victim and in a position of authority appear to account for a significant proportion of extrafamilial perpetrators (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Fleming, 1997; Smallbone &
Wortley, 2004; Russell, 1983). Indeed, Cossins (2000) argued that male and female children are most at risk from the extrafamilial offender who is known to, and in a position of authority over, the child. This may be a consequence of the type of relationship through which the perpetrator has access to his or her victims. Sullivan and Beech (2002) argue that extrafamilial perpetrators who target children within their work settings can be considered “professional perpetrators” (p. 153). Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, & Murphy, (1987) revealed that perpetrators of extrafamilial abuse offended more than ten times the average number of incidents against male victims compared to female victims. Extrafamilial perpetrators committed an average of 23.2 acts (median 1.4) of child molestation against female victims and an average of 281.7 acts (median 10.1) against male victims. The perpetrators reported having an average of 19.8 female victims (median of 1.3) and had an average of 150.2 male victims (median of 4.4). Lower median values indicate that some perpetrators reported extremely large numbers of offences, particularly against male victims.

The literature has shown that victim preferences are related to perpetrator recidivism rates. For example, perpetrators with a preference for unrelated or extrafamilial male children are more likely to be reconvicted of a new sexual offence. Not only is their risk of recidivism higher than other perpetrators, they also perpetrate against large numbers of victims (Fischer & McDonald, 1998).

There is limited research in Australia concerning the relationship between characteristics of extrafamilial perpetrators and their victims. The current study addresses this topic. It is claimed that extrafamilial child sexual abuse is more likely to come to the attention of police (Bolen, 2000). Therefore, police records have the potential to provide data on the phenomenon of extrafamilial abuse and were the source of information for this study.

Method

Sample

The dataset used in this study was a subset of Crown Briefs of Evidence (briefs), prepared by members of the Sexual Crimes Squad, Victoria Police. Only briefs related to offences alleged against extrafamilial perpetrators were examined. In many of the briefs the perpetrator was alleged to have offended against more than one victim. Thus, a brief contained information relating to one or more incidents of abuse, against one or more victims. Only briefs authorised to proceed to prosecution were selected. No information was obtained regarding conviction of the perpetrators. However, there was a strong likelihood that the charges contained within the briefs were upheld in most cases. Detective Senior Sergeant Chris O’Connor stated that “95% of authorised briefs would result in conviction” (personal communication, April 4, 2005).

Statements by the victims and perpetrators were the primary source of information for the dataset in this present study. Briefs between 2004 and 1997 were sampled as these were the most up to date available for examination. Finally, 93 briefs relating to extrafamilial child sexual abuse contact offences were examined: 13 from 1997, 11 from 1998, 15 from 1999, 13 from 2000, 18 from 2001, 14 from 2002, 6 from 2003 and 3 from 2004.

Data Collection and Coding

Data relating to victim gender and age at the earliest recorded offence was collected. Victim age was also categorised to reflect the age groupings of children that are theoretically targeted by paedophiles and hebephiles. Victims aged twelve years and under were categorised as ‘paedophilic’, whereas, victims aged thirteen to sixteen years were categorised as ‘hebephilic’. Victim preference has been shown to be related to recidivism rates (Fischer & McDonald, 1998). Based on the numbers of victims in the brief, the perpetrators were categorised as either ‘single victim’ or ‘multiple victim’ perpetrators. This dichotomy was utilised to explore any patterns of offending in terms of victim age and gender (Abel et al., 1987), and perpetrator employment (Sullivan & Beech, 2002). Perpetrator employment at the time of the offence was collated. Ten categories were identified: unskilled worker, skilled worker, teacher, unemployed, religious professional, youth leader, student, professional, carer, and retired.

Procedure

All of the data was reviewed and recorded by the author in the office of the Sexual Crimes Squad, Victoria Police (Australia). The content of the briefs varied in both quantity and quality due to the number of victims who had made statements, the content of the victim and perpetrator statements, and the number of incidents alleged against the perpetrator. Ethics approval for the research was granted both through the university Ethics Committee and the Victoria Police.

Results

Each of the 93 briefs of evidence contained information relating to one perpetrator (N = 93). The perpetrators had offended against a total of 237 victims (range 1 to 23 per perpetrator). These victims had a total of 721 incidents (range 1 to 19 per victim) of sexual abuse allegedly committed against them. All of the 93 perpetrators were male. There were 42 (45%) multiple victim perpetrators and 51 (55%) single victim
perpetrators (n = 51). These two perpetrator groups were then compared on the basis of victim gender and age selection.

**Gender Relationships**

Among the multiple victim perpetrators, 13 (31%) consistently chose female victims, 22 (52%) consistently chose male victims and 7 (17%) chose both male and female victims. For the single victim perpetrators, 27 (53%) chose female victims and 24 (47%) chose male victims. The data suggest that multiple perpetrators more frequently select male victims, whereas single victim perpetrators are roughly equivalent in terms of gender selection. However, because some multiple victim perpetrators chose both genders, the issue of gender selection as an either or question is problematic. Statistically the relationship can only be investigated by comparing multiple perpetrators who showed consistent gender preference with the gender preferences of single perpetrators. This analysis failed to reach significance ($\chi^2 (1, N = 86) = 1.50, p = .22$).

The relationship between victim gender and type of perpetrator can also be considered from the perspective of the 237 victims. Overall, males were twice as likely (68%) to be a victim (Table 1). Of the 186 victims who alleged abuse by a perpetrator who had multiple victims, the majority (74%) were male. Victims of single allegation perpetrators were more evenly distributed by gender. From the victim perspective, males are more likely to be offended against by a multiple victim perpetrator ($\chi^2 (1, N = 237) = 12.39, p < .001$).

**Victim Age Range, Gender and Perpetrator Type**

The perpetrator’s choice of victim was categorised according to the victim’s age range. Among the single perpetrators, 18 (35%) selected victims in the paedophilic range and 33 (65%) selected victims in the hebephilic age range. Choice of victim for multiple perpetrators was coded paedophilic or hebephilic only if all their victims were in the appropriate age range. They were coded ‘both’ if their victims were in both age categories. As a result, among multiple perpetrators, 21 (50.0%) selected only paedophilic victims, 10 (24%) selected only hebephilic victims and the remaining 11 (26%) selected victims from both age groups. Considering only exclusive preference for victim age range, multiple perpetrators were more likely to prefer younger victims by a ratio of 2:1 whereas the pattern was 2:1 in favour of hebephilic aged victims for single perpetrators ($\chi^2 (1, N = 82) = 6.89, p < .01$).

As with the analysis of gender, the relationship between victim age and type of perpetrator can be examined from the victim perspective. Of the 237 victims, 62% were in the paedophilic age range and 38% were in the hebephilic age range (Table 1). Children in the paedophilic age range (88%) were more likely to be a victim of a multiple perpetrator. Conversely, children in the hebephilic age range (65%) were more likely to be a victim of single perpetrators ($\chi^2 (1, N = 237) = 16.85, p < .001$).

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<td>48 (26%)</td>
<td>27 (53%)</td>
<td>75 (32%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>138 (74%)</td>
<td>24 (47%)</td>
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<td>Paedophilic</td>
<td>129 (88%)</td>
<td>18 (35%)</td>
<td>147 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebephilic</td>
<td>37 (12%)</td>
<td>33 (65%)</td>
<td>90 (38%)</td>
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**Note: Percents are columnwise**

Considering the categorical distribution of victim age by gender showed (not shown in table) a significant relationship ($\chi^2 (1, N = 237) = 10.06, p < .01$). Male victims were twice as likely to be in the paedophilic (69%) than the hebephilic (31%) age group. Female victims were reasonably evenly distributed between the paedophilic (47%) and hebephilic (53%) age groups.

**Perpetrator Employment and Gender**

For 21 (26%) of the perpetrators, employment was unknown. Among the remaining 72 perpetrators, the most frequent employment categories were for skilled worker (24%), religious professional (22%) and teachers (15%). Analysis of perpetrator employment by perpetrator type was limited by small numbers in some categories. For the most frequent employment categories, skilled workers were equivalently represented among multiple (47%) versus single perpetrators (53%). Among the teachers, 73% were multiple perpetrators compared with 27% single perpetrators. For religious professionals, 31% were multiple perpetrators and 69% were single perpetrators.

Analysis of gender of victim selected by perpetrators of different employment categories was limited by small numbers. The number of perpetrators reduced to 67 who showed consistency in gender selection and for whom employment was known. The most telling result showed that 10 teacher perpetrators selected males and none selected females. A similar gender differential was noted for religious professional perpetrators of whom 13 selected only male victims and 3 selected only female victims. None selected both genders.

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From the victim perspective, when employment of the perpetrator was known (N= 205), 60% of victims were offended against by perpetrators in a position of trust, power and or authority. Sixty-one (30%) children were victims of religious professionals, 39 (19%) were victims of teachers, 9 (4%) were victims of carers, 8 (4%) were victims of professionals and 6 (3%) were victims of youth workers. Gender analysis at the victim level showed 32 (82%) males victimised by teachers compared with 7 (18%) females. This pattern was even more dramatic for the 57 (93%) male victims of religious professionals compared with the 4 (7%) female victims.

Other results that could not be covered here in detail showed there was an association between three perpetrator-victim relationship types: (1) power and authority, (2) friendship and acquaintance, (3) stranger and victim gender. Males were disproportionately offended against by perpetrators in a position of power and authority and nearly half of all female victims were offended against by perpetrators in a friendship and acquaintance relationship. A summary of the trends in relation to the severity of sexual assault (Russell, 1983) revealed that the offence behaviours encompassed by the category of ‘very serious sexual assault’ were perpetrated by strangers or perpetrators in a friendship and acquaintance relationship with the victims. There was a trend for female victims to experience more ‘serious sexual assault’. The category of ‘least serious sexual assault’ was predominantly perpetrated against male victims in the paedophilic age group by perpetrators in a position of power and authority. Finally, males and females had on average the same number of incidents of sexual abuse perpetrated against them.

**Discussion**

Analysis of perpetrator, victim and offence characteristics from a sample of Crown Briefs of Evidence revealed several patterns. First, single versus multiple victim perpetrators showed no differential preference for victim gender. Most multiple perpetrators consistently selected one gender or the other, but 17% had victims of both genders; findings which are similar to Guay et al. (2001). In terms of age of victim though, there was a difference with multiple perpetrators who were more often involved with children in the paedophilic age range. Single perpetrators were more often involved with hebephilic aged children. One quarter of multiple victim perpetrators were involved with children in both age ranges.

From the victim perspective, males are most likely to be sexually victimised overall by perpetrators outside the family. However, this pattern occurs largely because males are more likely to be the victims of multiple perpetrators. These results corroborate earlier findings by Sjostedt et al. (2004) and lend support to a preferential aspect to extrafamilial child sex offending. Paedophilic aged children were more likely to be males and the victim of a multiple perpetrator. Hebephilic aged children were equivalently of both genders and likely to be victimised by a single perpetrator. These results contradict Lanning’s (1986) finding that the older the victim, the more exclusive the gender preference. Similarly, the results are at odds with the findings of Marshall et al. (1988) who found that heterosexually oriented perpetrators tended to choose prepubescent victims of both genders, and homosexually oriented perpetrators preferred pubescent male victims.

The results of the present study can be explained individually and situationaly. Sexual deviance has been shown to be a highly stable characteristic or trait. Indeed, the selection of male victims has been shown to be a strong predictor of recidivism (Craig et al, 2005). Contrary to Prentky, Knight, & Lee, (1997), the results in this study revealed that victim gender was associated with repeated offending as evidenced by the numbers of male victims offended against. Teachers were predominantly multiple victim perpetrators and they disproportionately selected male victims. The majority of religious professionals were single victim perpetrators. Examination of the numbers of victims that religious professionals offended against revealed they were responsible for a third of all victims. Thus, a small number of religious professionals offended against a large number of victims. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of all the victims offended against by religious professionals were males (Cossins, 2000; Fischer & McDonald, 1998).

The perpetrator’s employment may provide a situational explanation of the patterns or trends in the gender selection and frequencies of victims (Smallbone & Wortley, 2004). In many instances, the perpetrator’s access and opportunity to children was made more readily available by virtue of their employment. Males and females may have been preferentially selected or were opportunistically available to perpetrators in some of these occupations. In this regard some perpetrators may have been more akin to ‘professional perpetrators’ (Sullivan & Beech, 2002). The notion of a ‘professional perpetrator’ may not only provide a situational explanation but also highlight individual perpetrator dynamics. Particular institutions might attract the type of person who actively seeks these roles in order to gain access to children. Alternatively, an individual may not actively seek these roles, however due to individual dynamics, seize upon the opportunity to exploit children. Hence a potential perpetrator might flourish in certain environments where there is an inherent position
of trust, power and authority. The natural vulnerability of children is thus ripe to be manipulated which many abusers do by virtue of their status, power and authority within institutions (Cossins, 2000; Sullivan & Beech, 2002).

A major limitation of this study is that the distinction between multiple victim and single perpetrators only holds for the briefs examined. In making the category of multiple versus single victim perpetrators, it was recognised that allocation to either category was dependent upon the information supplied in the briefs by the victims, perpetrators and discovered by the police investigating the alleged crime/s. For example, a perpetrator may have been categorised as a single victim perpetrator, but had offended against other victims, who had not been discovered. Contrastingly, victims may have disclosed to the police, but due to a lack of prima facie evidence the brief was not authorised to proceed. It was also possible that information relating to another victim of a single victim perpetrator was contained in a brief that was not sampled by the researcher.

In summary, the findings of this study revealed that there was a preferential aspect to extrariparitional child sexual abuse. Extrariparitional perpetrators who had offended against more than one victim tended to prefer male victims. This finding lends support to previous research (Craig et al., 2005) indicating that the selection of male victims is a predictor of recidivism. Furthermore, perpetrators who had selected children aged twelve and under also revealed a preferential element to their offending. Perpetrators who selected children older than twelve were more likely to be a single victim perpetrator and both genders were equivalently represented. Finally, the perpetrator's employment at the time of offending, may have provided unique opportunities to gain access to and abuse children. In conclusion, victim age, gender selection and perpetrator employment are associated with repeated offending. It is hoped that the results may provide a platform on which to examine the risk of re-offending and inform the investigative processes of extrariparitional perpetrators.

Acknowledgments

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References


