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Child Sexual Abuse: Offender Characteristics and Modus Operandi

Stephen W. Smallbone and Richard K. Wortley

There is no question that public awareness and concern about child sexual abuse has increased in Australia in recent years. In Queensland, for example, official statistics indicate that the rate of sexual offences reported to police doubled between 1994 and 1998 from about 92 per 100,000 to more than 190 per 100,000. The majority of these offences were committed against children younger than 16 years of age (Criminal Justice Commission 1999).

There is no clear evidence, however, that the incidence of child sexual abuse itself is increasing; rather, increased reporting rates appear partly to reflect a greater willingness by victims and others to report allegations of child sexual abuse. Indeed, many alleged child sexual offences are not reported until long after they have occurred. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that child sexual abuse is a major social problem.

This paper suggests that developmental and early intervention programs that are known to reduce rates of general crime may be equally effective in the reduction of sexual crime.

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International efforts to understand the perpetration of child sexual abuse have been constrained by a number of important conceptual and methodological problems. First, there is a broad consensus among researchers that child sexual offending and child sexual offenders are heterogeneous. That is, there is considerable variation both in the ways sexual offences against children are perpetrated (for example, tactics employed to select and "groom" children; sexual and other behaviours involved in the commission of offences; methods of avoiding detection) and in the characteristics of the perpetrators themselves (for example, age, ethnicity, education, psychosocial and psychosexual background, level of sexual interest in children, relationship with victims, general criminality). Causal explanations are similarly varied and, although there are several established theoretical formulations (psychoanalytic, biological, behavioural), none enjoys the support of a strong empirical base. Perhaps in lieu of a clearer conceptual consensus, most researchers agree that sexual offending against children is a multi-dimensional and multi-determined phenomenon.

Although research efforts are expanding rapidly, sexual offending against children has, for a variety of reasons, remained a difficult phenomenon to study, not the least because of the secrecy which typically surrounds the commission of these offences. The majority of research data on child sexual offending has been derived from clinical studies of convicted (usually incarcerated) offenders undergoing treatment. Although such studies have produced a large and rich empirical literature, it is unclear the extent to which these findings can be generalised, even to the larger population of convicted offenders. The reliability and validity of these data are typically compromised by the absence of confidentiality, since such offenders would normally be aware that information provided by them may affect decisions concerning

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their progress in treatment and their release from prison. Further, many studies do not provide sufficient descriptive data to allow comparison of findings from different samples and from different jurisdictions. Finally, comparisons between different subtypes of sexual offenders are often made difficult by the use of small samples and/or by differences in the typological frameworks employed by researchers.

One study that overcame many of the above methodological problems was conducted by Abel et al. in the United States in the late 1980s. This was an unusual study insofar as it was based on confidential self-report data from a large number of known sexual offenders. Although the findings have not been fully replicated, the reports from this study (Abel et al. 1987, 1988; Abel & Osborn 1992) have continued to have a major impact, especially on the development of treatment programs for sexual offenders. The main findings were that:

- a) sexual offenders usually begin offending in adolescence (early onset);
- b) they are likely to have committed many more sexual offences than ever become officially known; and
- c) they are likely to experience a broad range of sexually deviant interests and urges (multiple paraphilias).

The emphasis on sexual deviance as the central feature of interest added weight firstly to the popular conception that sexual offending, unlike non-sexual offending, is a specialised form of criminal activity, and secondly to the clinical programs of the time which tended to concentrate on changing the “deviant sexual preferences” of known sexual offenders.

More recently, a number of large-scale correctional studies (for example, Broadhurst & Maller 1992; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997; Hanson & Bussiere 1998; Soothill et al. 2000) have shown that incarcerated sexual offenders are more likely to have previous convictions for non-sexual offences than for sexual offences, and that after

release they are more likely to commit new non-sexual offences than they are to commit new sexual offences. Such findings clearly suggest that sexual offenders, including sexual offenders against children, are more versatile in their criminal “career” than is generally accepted. Nevertheless, treatment programs for sexual offenders remain highly specialised, and sexual abuse prevention initiatives continue largely to ignore the growing body of knowledge available from the broader crime prevention literature.

The present study aimed to gather both official demographic and offence history data, and confidential self-report data, from a large sample of men currently serving sentences in Queensland for sexual offences against children. In particular, the study aimed to investigate a number of features that were considered to be of theoretical and practical significance, and which might inform preventative, investigative and corrective efforts, namely:

- offenders’ psychosocial and psychosexual histories;
- differences between official and unofficial rates of child sexual offending;
- the extent of offenders’ non-sexual criminal activity;
- the extent to which offenders have engaged in multiple “paraphilias” (that is, a variety of forms of sexual deviance, such as voyeurism or exhibitionism);
- the offenders’ modus operandi; and
- the extent of formal and informal networking among offenders.

A more comprehensive description of the method and results of this study is available elsewhere (see Smallbone & Wortley 2000). The present paper provides a brief description of the method and summarises selected findings.

Method

Adult males currently serving sentences in Queensland for sexual offences against children were approached individually

and invited to participate in the study. Official demographic and offence history data were gathered on all 323 prospective participants. Of these, 182 (56.3%) agreed to anonymously complete a 386-item self-report questionnaire developed in large part from Kaufman’s (1989) modus operandi questionnaire.

Based on their confidential self-reports, the 182 responders were categorised into one of four mutually exclusive groups:

- intrafamilial offenders (those who had offended only within family settings);
- extrafamilial offenders (those who had offended only outside family settings);
- mixed-type offenders (those who had offended both within and outside family settings); and
- deniers (those who denied ever having committed a child sexual offence).

The sample consisted of 79 intrafamilial offenders, 60 extrafamilial offenders, 30 mixed-type offenders and 13 deniers.

Results

Offender Characteristics

Selected offender characteristics are summarised in Table 1. Data on education and marital status were obtained from official records. Data on current sexual orientation and childhood sexual abuse were obtained from offender self-reports.

A substantial majority of offenders had not completed secondary education. There were no differences in education between offender subgroups, but less educated offenders were significantly less likely to agree to participate in the study.

There were differences between offender subgroups with respect to their marital status. Perhaps the most striking of these is that extrafamilial offenders were significantly more likely than the other offenders to have never been married.

More than three-quarters of the offenders reported an exclusively heterosexual orientation. Extrafamilial and mixed-type offenders were more

Table 1: Selected offender characteristics (%)

	Offender subtypes			Deniers	Non-responders
	Intra-familial	Extra-familial	Mixed-type		
Education					
Grades 1 to 7	15.5	14.3	14.8	0.0	21.5
Grades 8 to 10	53.5	53.6	55.6	33.3	62.8
Grades 11 to 12	19.7	19.6	18.5	16.7	12.4
Other (trade/university)	11.2	12.3	11.1	33.3	3.3
Marital status					
Married/de facto (current)	38.5	18.3	24.1	30.8	–
Separated/divorced	52.6	21.7	34.5	53.9	–
Never married	7.7	51.7	37.9	15.4	–
Sexual orientation (to adults)					
Heterosexual	94.9	59.3	53.3	91.7	–
Homosexual	2.5	15.3	13.3	0.0	–
Bisexual	2.5	23.7	20.0	8.3	–
Asexual	0.0	1.7	13.3	0.0	–
Sexually abused as a child	57.7	53.3	73.3	7.7	–

likely to report either a homosexual or bisexual orientation.

About 55 per cent of the combined offenders reported at least one episode of childhood sexual abuse, with the mixed-type offenders (73.3%) more likely than other offenders to have been sexually abused.

Offending Histories

Table 2 presents selected official and self-report data relating to offending histories. Almost two-thirds (62.9%) of the offenders had at least one previous conviction, and this was almost twice as likely to have been for non-sexual offences (40.6%) than for sexual offences (22.2%). Of the 199 offenders with previous convictions, 82.2 per cent had first been convicted of a non-sexual offence. The most common offence for which first convictions were recorded was theft.

Intrafamilial offenders (10.8%) were the least likely to have previous convictions for sexual offences, but were somewhat more likely to have previous convictions for non-sexual offences (48.6%).

According to the offenders' self-reports, they were, on average, 31.5 years of age (range: 14 to 61 years) at the time they first had sexual contact with a child, and 38.4 years (range: 17 to 73 years) at the time they last had sexual contact with a child. Intrafamilial offenders offended over a shorter average period (4.4 years) than extrafamilial (7.8 years) and mixed-type offenders (11.0 years).

Multiple Paraphilias

The number of offenders with diagnosable paraphilias other than paedophilia was quite low, although there were some significant differences between offender subtypes. Mixed-type offenders (13.3%) were more likely than either extrafamilial (3.4%) or intrafamilial offenders (3.8%) to have engaged in exhibitionism (exposing genitals to a stranger). Mixed-type offenders (16.7%) were also more likely than extrafamilial (8.6%) or intrafamilial offenders (6.4%) to have engaged in frotteurism (rubbing sexually against strangers).

Apart from exhibitionism (5.4%), frotteurism (9.0%) and voyeurism (5.4%), fewer than five per cent of offenders could have been diagnosed with a paraphilia other than paedophilia.

Networking Among Offenders

Almost one-third of the offenders (29.6%) had knowledge of other child sexual offenders prior to themselves first being charged

with a child sexual offence. Mixed-type offenders (53.6%) were significantly more likely to have known of other child sexual offenders than were either the extrafamilial (24.1%) or intrafamilial offenders (25.0%).

Only 8.6 per cent said they had talked to other child sexual offenders prior to themselves first being charged. Again, mixed-type offenders (25.0%) were more likely than the extrafamilial (8.5%) and intrafamilial offenders (2.6%) to do so.

Few offenders (3.7%) became involved with another individual or a group who organised sexual contact with children. Once again, the mixed-type offenders (13.8%) were more likely than the extrafamilial offenders (3.4%) and the intrafamilial offenders (0.0%) to do so.

Mixed-type offenders were more likely than other offenders to report prison-based networking activities. For example, 17.9 per cent of the mixed-type group reported having been provided with information about access to children for sexual contact, compared to 3.7 per cent of the extrafamilial offenders. None of the intrafamilial offenders reported such contact.

Only one offender (a mixed-type offender) reported having used the Internet to gain contact with clubs, chat groups or individuals concerned with child sexual activity.

Modus Operandi

Five aspects of offender modus operandi were examined:

1. victim characteristics;
2. details of the offender's first sexual encounter;

Table 2: Selected offence history data

	Offender subtypes				
	Intra-familial	Extra-familial	Mixed-type	Deniers	Non-responders
Mean age (years)					
First sexual contact with a child	33.1	29.4	31.1	–	–
Last sexual contact with a child	37.8	37.1	42.1	–	–
First sentenced for any offence	31.0	30.0	28.4	26.4	30.7
Sentenced for current offence	41.7	40.0	42.6	35.6	42.3
Previous convictions (%)					
Property	36.5	30.5	44.8	41.7	40.4
Violent	16.4	18.6	27.6	41.7	22.0
Sexual	10.8	30.5	41.1	25.0	20.6
Any offence	61.6	61.0	69.0	58.3	60.3

3. behaviours employed by the offender prior to having sexual contact with a child;
4. the offending behaviours themselves; and
5. behaviours employed by the offender after sexual contact with a child.

Victim Characteristics

The 169 offenders who admitted having committed at least one sexual offence against a child disclosed offences concerning a total of 1,010 children (748 boys and 262 girls), of which 393 (38.9%) were reported to have been associated with official convictions. Whereas boys accounted for about half (52%) of the officially recognised victims (that is, those associated with official convictions), according to offender self-reports about 74 per cent of victims were boys. This suggests that the sexual victimisation of boys may be even more underestimated, perhaps both in victimisation surveys and official statistics, than that of girls.

The level of victimisation was not evenly distributed. Intrafamilial offenders disclosed on average 1.5 victims, extrafamilial offenders 6.1 victims, and mixed-type offenders 20.0 victims. Almost half (47.3%) of the combined offenders reported having offended against just one child and a further 16.4% reported having offended against two children. Fewer than 10 per cent of offenders reported more than 10 victims, and only two offenders reported 100 or more victims.

Details of First Sexual Contact

In order to examine factors relating to the onset of the abusive behaviour, participants were asked to provide details of their first sexual encounter with a child.

The ages of the offenders' first victim were fairly evenly distributed across middle childhood and early adolescence, with 75.6 per cent between nine and 16 years of age, and 22.8 per cent between five and eight years. Fewer than two per cent of victims were reported to have been younger than four years of age.

Whereas intrafamilial offenders, by definition, were related to or lived with their victims, 13.3 per cent of extrafamilial offenders and 10.3 per cent of mixed-type offenders reported having had their first sexual contact with a child they regarded as a "stranger". Overall, only 6.5 per cent of offenders had their first sexual contact with a stranger.

Seventy-two per cent of offenders had more than one sexual encounter with their first victim and 28 per cent had more than 10 sexual encounters. Not surprisingly, multiple sexual contacts with the first victim were more likely for intrafamilial and mixed-type offenders than for extrafamilial offenders. Similarly, intrafamilial and mixed-type offenders tended to have a relationship with their first victim that extended over a longer period of time than was the case for extrafamilial offenders. Overall, 29.5 per cent of offenders had a sexual relationship that lasted less than one day, while 36.7 per cent had a relationship that lasted longer than 12 months.

Pre-Offence Behaviours

For extrafamilial offenders, the most common locations for finding children with whom sexual contact later occurred were at a friend's home (36.5%) and through organised activities such as sporting associations and scouts (18.9%). For mixed-type offenders, the most common locations were at a friend's home (47.8%), in the nearby neighbourhood (30.4%) and while babysitting (30.4%). Intrafamilial offenders, by definition, offended against children with whom a prior familial relationship existed.

For intrafamilial offenders, the most common means for organising time alone with a victim were being at home alone with the knowledge of his wife/girlfriend (57.7%) and watching television with the child (36.6%). For extrafamilial offenders, the most common means were watching television with the child (32.2%), letting the child sleep in the same bed (30.5%) and going for car rides with the child (30.5%). For mixed-type

offenders, the most common means were watching television with the child (73.3%), sneaking into the child's bedroom at night (63.3%) and letting the child sleep in his bed (60.0%).

For extrafamilial offenders, the most commonly used strategies directed toward victims' parents were making friends with the child's parents or caretaker (44.4%) and spending time with the child while his/her parent was present (44.4%). For mixed-type offenders, the most common means were spending time with the child while his/her parent was present (50%), making friends with the child's parent/caretaker (45.8%) and helping the child's parent(s) around the house (45.8%).

For intrafamilial offenders, the most common means of developing a victim's trust prior to sexual contact were spending a lot of time with them (70.9%), touching the child non-sexually (67.1%) and giving them a lot of attention (64.6%). For extrafamilial offenders, the most common means were touching them non-sexually (64.4%), giving them a lot of attention (59.3%), spending a lot of time with them (55.9%) and doing things the child wanted to do (55.9%). For mixed-type offenders, the most common means were playing with them (83.3%), spending a lot of time with them (82.8%) and giving them a lot of attention (79.3%).

The strategies employed by offenders to get the child to take part in sexual activity tended to involve gradual desensitisation. Intrafamilial offenders tended to touch the child non-sexually (55.7%), give the child non-sexual attention (50.6%) and say nice things about them (45.6%). Extrafamilial offenders tended to give the child non-sexual attention (55.9%), touch the child non-sexually (54.2%) and progressively touch the child more and more sexually (49.2%). Mixed-type offenders gave the child non-sexual attention (86.7%), said nice things about them (80.0%), touched the child non-sexually (73.3%) and said loving, caring things to them (73.3%).

Offence Behaviours

Offenders usually knew the child, often for significant periods of time, before sexual contact occurred. For example, 76.3 per cent of the intrafamilial offenders, 27.8 per cent of the extrafamilial offenders and 39.1 per cent of the mixed-type offenders had known the child for more than one year before having sexual contact with them.

Offences usually occurred in the offender's home (83.3% for intrafamilial offenders; 45.8% for extrafamilial offenders; and 76.7% for mixed-type offenders). Other common locations where offences occurred were going for a car ride (21.5% for intrafamilial; 25.4% for extrafamilial; and 46.7% for mixed-type offenders) and in isolated places (16.5% for intrafamilial; 23.7% for extrafamilial; and 53.3% for mixed-type offenders).

The duration of single sexual contacts with children ranged from less than five minutes to, in some rare cases, more than one hour. More than half of the combined offenders (59.7%) reported the duration of their sexual contacts with a child to have been 15 minutes or less.

The most common behaviours employed by offenders during sexual contact with victims were touching the child's buttocks, breasts or genitals (82.1%) and putting his mouth on the child's genitals (42.9%). Patterns of offence behaviours were similar for the three offender subtypes, although extrafamilial offenders (40.0%) were somewhat more likely to perform oral sex on their victims than were intrafamilial (26.6%) and mixed-type offenders (20.3%).

The most common behaviour the offenders had children do to them was having the child touch his penis (66.7% of the combined offenders). Other common behaviours were having the child perform oral sex on him (43.5%) and having the child masturbate him to ejaculation (39.3%). Mixed-type offenders were somewhat more likely to have the child masturbate him to ejaculation (60.0%) and to have the child perform anal sex on him (the offender) (23.3%).

According to the offenders, the most common means employed by victims to stop the sexual contact were telling the offender they did not want to do it (40.2%), saying no (31.2%), demanding to be left alone (25.9%) and crying (19.2%). These also tended to be the strategies that were the most successful in deterring offenders from continuing to abuse a child.

Post-Offence Behaviours

It tended to take less than an hour for offenders to take a child to the place where sexual contact occurred and then to return the child (64 per cent of the combined offenders). However, nearly half (44.4%) of the extrafamilial offenders and 31.7 per cent of the mixed-type offenders took more than one hour to return the child.

The most commonly used means of keeping a child from disclosing the abuse were saying he (the offender) would go to jail or get into trouble if the child told anyone (60.5% of the combined offenders), hoping the child would not want to lose the offender because he provided affection (35.7%) and giving the child special rewards or privileges if they did not tell anyone (20.8%).

Offenders reported that the child's parents usually knew he (the offender) had been spending time alone with their child (71.1%). One-third (33.3%) of the combined offenders considered that the child's parents liked them (the offender). Alarming, 21.4 per cent of the offenders believed the child's parent(s) knew about the sexual contact but did not report it.

living with the offender, in most cases the parents knew that their child was spending time with the perpetrator. According to the offenders, it was not uncommon for the parents of the child victim to know about the abuse but not report it.

Second, the strategies employed by offenders to gain the compliance of children more often involve giving gifts, lavishing attention and attempting to form emotional bonds than making threats or engaging in physical coercion. Many sexual encounters with children were preceded by some form of non-sexual physical contact. According to the offenders, there were relatively few cases where other forms of violence were part of the sexual abuse.

Third, serial child sexual offending is relatively uncommon. Almost half of the current sample reported that they had been involved with just one victim, and fewer than 10 per cent were involved with more than 10 children. Further, there is little evidence in these findings of organised paedophile networks. Prison clearly provides opportunities for informal networking, but it appears that relatively few offenders become actively involved in prison-based networking.

Fourth, perpetrators of child sexual abuse are three times more likely to abuse female than male children. In the case of intrafamilial abuse, girls are over 10 times more likely to be victims. However, more generally, males are nearly three times more likely than females to be abused. This is because the relatively few chronic offenders in the sample were more likely to target male victims.

Finally, child sexual offenders do not necessarily form a distinct offender category. Two-thirds of the offenders in the present study had previous convictions, and these were twice as likely to be for non-sexual offences as for sexual offences. Remarkably, a large majority of offenders (82.2%) with previous convictions were first convicted of a non-sexual offence.

Discussion

Results of the study challenge a number of commonly held assumptions about sexual offending against children. First, the findings reinforce what researchers have known for some time—but what is frequently ignored in public debates—that child sexual abuse overwhelmingly involves perpetrators who are related to or known to the victim. Even where the victim was not related to or

Highlighting these findings is not meant to diminish the seriousness of child sexual abuse, nor to deny the existence of the stereotypic paedophile. However, these findings do provide a guide for more focused prevention, investigation and treatment efforts.

In terms of prevention, the findings suggest, for example, that developmental and early intervention programs that are known to reduce rates of general crime may be equally effective in the reduction of sexual crime, since childhood problems (including harsh parental discipline, parental rejection, marital conflict and sexual abuse) appear to be quite common in the backgrounds of child sexual offenders.

The findings also suggest that public education campaigns focusing on “stranger danger” need to be balanced with programs that recognise the danger that exists for many children in the home and among friends. The data on the modus operandi of perpetrators will need to be given very careful consideration because the kinds of behaviours typically employed prior to the commission of these offences are the kinds of behaviours that would normally indicate *positive* parenting. In this sense, it may be very difficult to identify important warning signs for carers. Nevertheless, parents should be aware of the common tactic of intrafamilial offenders to seek (perhaps unusual) opportunities to have time alone with their victim, and for extrafamilial offenders to ingratiate themselves with their victim’s parents. With due caution, children can also be made aware of the grooming behaviours of perpetrators and be taught self-protective strategies. Post-offence behaviours may be somewhat more easily observed, since these typically involve subtle but very manipulative efforts by the offender to avoid detection. It would be unsurprising, for example, to find discrete changes in victims’ behaviour following sexual contact with an offender.

Investigating child sexual offending is likely to be fraught

with difficulty, since offender strategies for avoiding detection appear subtly directed toward their child victim, and often involve strategies that are likely to result in children themselves feeling responsible for not disclosing the abuse. The targeting of active child sexual offenders may need to consider whether extrafamilial offenders or intrafamilial offenders should be given priority. On one hand, extrafamilial offenders are responsible for many more victims. On the other hand, intrafamilial offenders may cause much more overall harm, since they tend to offend repeatedly against one or two children who, because of the context of the abuse, may be limited in their ability to secure much-needed familial support.

With respect to treatment, the findings challenge the tendency in many programs to emphasise the deviant sexual preferences of child sexual offenders, that is, to treat child sexual offending as a specialised and distinct crime problem. The current findings reveal that a substantial majority of child sexual offenders are involved more generally in criminal activity. Many child sexual offences may therefore be explained as extensions of more general antisocial patterns of behaviour, perhaps involving opportunism, the exploitation of interpersonal relationships, or the disregard of socially accepted codes of behaviour. Such a reconceptualisation of child sexual offending would allow a considerable body of knowledge and expertise from the broader crime prevention and offender treatment literatures to be brought to bear on this important problem.

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