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SOMAPI RESEARCH BRIEF

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

Luis C.deBaca, Director • July 2015

Adult Sex Offender Typologies

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Sexual violence remains a serious social problem with devastating consequences. The challenge of "making society safer" not only includes the need for resources, but also requires a comprehensive understanding of accurate offense patterns and risk. This knowledge may be used to devise offense typologies, or classification systems, that will inform decisions regarding investigation, sentencing, treatment, and supervision.

This Research Brief addresses adult sex offender typologies. It reviews those most frequently used and empirically tested for child sexual abusers, rapists, female offenders, and Internet sexual offenders. It also reviews recently developed models of the sexual offense process that have been devised to include etiological theories of sexual offending and treatment-relevant factors, as they may ultimately replace traditional typologies to inform treatment and management of sexual offenders.[1]

Summary of Research Findings on Traditional Typologies

Child Sexual Abusers

The most important distinction among child sexual abusers is whether they are pedophilic or nonpedophilic. Pedophilia is a strong predictor of sexual recidivism (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). Not all individuals who sexually assault children are pedophiles. Pedophilia consists of a sexual preference for children that may or may not lead to child sexual abuse, whereas child sexual abuse involves sexual contact with a child that may or may not be due to pedophilia (Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008).

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About SOMAPI

In 2011, the SMART Office began work on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management. As part of the effort, the SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and develop summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. These summaries are available online at http://smart.gov/SOMAPI/index.html.

A national inventory of sex offender management professionals also was conducted in 2011 to gain insight about promising practices and pressing needs in the field. Finally, a Discussion Forum involving national experts was held in 2012 for the purpose of reviewing the research summaries and inventory results and refining what is currently known about sex offender management.

Based on the work carried out under SOMAPI, the SMART Office has published a series of Research Briefs, each focusing on a topic covered in the sexual offending and sex offender management literature review. Each brief is designed to get key findings from the literature review into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Overall, the briefs are intended to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for sexual offenders and provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization.

Types of Child Sexual Abusers

Child sexual abusers have been classified based on the degree to which the sexual behavior is entrenched and the basis for psychological needs (fixated-regressed typology) (Groth, Hobson, & Gary, 1982). The fixated offender prefers interaction with children socially and sexually (Simon et al., 1992). These individuals often develop and maintain relationships with children to manipulate potential victims and satisfy their sexual needs. Regressed child sexual abusers prefer social and sexual interaction with adults; their sexual involvement with children is situational (Simon et al., 1992). The majority of fixated child sexual abusers are individuals who sexually assault male children who are not related. Regressed child sexual abusers often consist of incest offenders or offenders who sexually assault female adolescents (Priest & Smith, 1992).

Victim Characteristic Distinction

The gender of the victim remains an important distinction among child sexual abusers because this factor has been shown to be a predictor of sexual reoffense (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). Studies have found that child sexual abusers who sexually assault females report more than twice as many victims as same-sex child offenders (Abel et al., 1981). Mixed-gender child sexual abusers report the highest number of victims and offenses (Simons & Tyler, 2010), and they have the highest rates of risk for reoffense (Abel et al., 1988). Intrafamilial child sexual abusers (i.e., incest offenders) are likely to cause less injury, are less likely to exhibit pedophilia, and have lower sexual and violent recidivism rates (Rice and Harris, 2002). Extrafamilial child sexual abusers are more likely to be di+agnosed with pedophilia and are often unable to maintain adult relationships (Prentky et al., 1989). Studies have reported that intrafamilial child sexual abusers have fewer victims compared to extrafamilial sexual offenders (Miner & Dwyer, 1997).

Rapists

Rapists typically assault as a result of anger, hostility, and vindictiveness (Polaschek, Ward, & Hudson, 1997). Compared to child sexual abusers, rapists are more likely to be younger and socially competent (Gannon & Ward, 2008). In addition, rapists often display the following criminogenic needs: intimacy deficits, negative peer influences, deficits in sexual and general self-regulation, and offense-supportive attitudes (Craissati, 2005). Rapists also have been found to have a greater number of prior convictions for a violent crime, and they tend to use greater levels of force than child sexual abusers (Bard et al., 1987). Likewise, rapists are more likely to reoffend violently rather than sexually. Rapists have been shown to resemble violent offenders or criminals in general. Similarly to child sexual abusers, rapists are often classified by their relationship to the victim (i.e., stranger vs. acquaintance). About 3 out of every 4 rapists know their victims (Harrell, 2012). Acquaintance rapists are less violent and opportunistic than stranger rapists.

Female Sexual Offenders

In contrast to male sexual offenders, female offenders are more likely to sexually assault males and strangers (Allen, 1991). Female sexual offenders also are less likely than male offenders to sexually reoffend (Freeman & Sandler, 2008). Compared to males, female offenders are more likely to sexually assault with another person. Those who are coerced into sexual offending are motivated by fear and dependence upon the co-offender (Matthews, Mathews, & Speltz, 1991), and they tend to report a history of childhood sexual and physical abuse.

Female offenders who sexually abuse alone are differentiated based on age of the victim and motivation for the offense (Nathan & Ward, 2002). One typology, the teacher lover/heterosexual nurturer, describes female offenders who sexually abuse adolescent boys within the context of an acquaintance or position-of-trust relationship (Nathan & Ward, 2002). These females are less likely to report severe child maltreatment; instead, their sexual abuse behaviors often result from a dysfunctional adult relationship and attachment deficits. Self-initiated female offenders who sexually assault prepubescent children have been shown to display significant psychopathologies (Matthews, Mathews, & Speltz, 1991), and they are more likely than other female offenders to display symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression. These female offenders report extensive physical and sexual abuse by caregivers.

Internet Offenders

The Internet has been used as a vehicle for child sexual abuse in at least three ways: viewing child pornography,

sharing child pornography, and luring or procuring child victims online (Robertiello & Terry, 2007). Internet offenders have been classified into four groups: those who access pornographic images impulsively or out of curiosity; those who access or trade pornography to fuel their sexual interest in children; those who use the Internet as part of a pattern of offline contact offending, including those who use it to acquire victims (Beech et al., 2008; Delmonico & Griffin, 2008); and those who download pornographic images for nonsexual reasons (e.g., financial gain) (Beech et al., 2008). To date, studies have not systematically identified the personality characteristics, criminogenic needs, or risk factors of Internet offenders. In addition, the prevalence of pedophilia among Internet offenders remains unknown.

Limitations of Traditional Typologies: Crossover Offending

Traditional typologies rely on an official record and/or self-report data. More than 25 years of research (including victim and offender studies) have shown that only 1 to 3 percent of offenders' self-admitted sexual offenses are identified in official records (Abel et al., 1988; English et al., 2003; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). These studies have also reported a "crossover effect" with sex offenders admitting to multiple victims and offenses atypical of criminal classification. Specifically, studies have shown that rapists often sexually assault children, and incest offenders often sexually assault children both within and outside their families (see, for example, Abel et al., 1988; English et al., 2000; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003; O'Connell, 1998). Studies have found age crossover (i.e., victimizing both children and adults) prevalence rates ranging from 29 to 73 percent (Simons, Heil, & English, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2005), and gender crossover rates ranging from 20 to 43 percent (Abel & Osborn, 1992; English et al., 2000; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003). Most offenders who assault males have also assaulted females (63 to 92 percent), but not the reverse (23 to 37 percent). With respect to relationship crossover, studies have shown that 64–66 percent of incest offenders report sexually assaulting children to whom they were not related (Abel and Osborn, 1992; English et al., 2000; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003).

Recent Advances in the Development of Sexual Offense Patterns

Recent models of the sexual offense process have been devised to include etiological theories of sexual offending and treatment-relevant factors. They are based on clusters of behaviors and psychological processes to account for the heterogeneity of offending. The most promising models are the developmental pathways of sexual offending model, the self-regulation model, and the specialist vs. generalist model.

Developmental Histories of Sexual Offenders

Etiological research suggests that the development of sexual offending behavior is influenced by the interaction of biological and social learning factors (Ward & Beech, 2008). Genetic factors may predispose an individual to pursue a specific human need (e.g., sex or intimacy), but environmental experiences provide the methods through which these needs are met (Ward & Beech, 2008). It is important to keep in mind that not all sexual offenders report being sexually victimized during childhood; however, negative developmental experiences figure prominently in many models of sexual offending behavior, and recent research suggests that there may not be only one type of abuse that serves as a developmental risk factor for sexual offending. Instead, multiple types of abusive experiences, or a pathological family environment, may precede offending behaviors (Dube et al., 2001).In addition, different types of maltreatment may be associated with different types of sexual offending (see, for example, Lee et al., 2002; Simons, Wurtele, & Heil, 2002).

Studies have found that child sexual abusers have experienced heightened sexuality in childhood. Juveniles who commit sexual offenses are more likely than non-sex-offenders to report exposure to sexual violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009). Among adult sex offenders, those who sexually abuse children report more experiences of sexual abuse victimization during childhood than rapists (Simons, Wurtele, and Durham, 2004). The childhood histories of rapists appear more indicative of violence. Compared to child sexual abusers, rapists report more frequent experiences of physical

abuse, parental violence, and emotional abuse (Simons, Wurtele, and Durham, 2004).

Studies examining the developmental risk factors of crossover or indiscriminate offenders have found that indiscriminate offenders report childhood histories of both violence and heightened sexuality (see, for example, Heil & Simons, 2008; Simons, Tyler, & Heil, 2005). Indiscriminate offenders also report being exposed to domestic violence significantly more frequently than rapists.

The majority of female sexual offenders report both violent and sexualized childhoods (Heil, Simons, & Burton, 2010). Most female sexual offenders report physical abuse, emotional abuse, and witnessing of domestic violence (Simons et al., 2008).

Attachment

Research also suggests that most sex offenders exhibit insecure attachment (Marsa et al., 2004). Recent models of sexual deviance suggest that poor parental bonding enhances the effects of child maltreatment and may subsequently initiate the processes that lead to sexual offending by creating vulnerability in the child (Marshall & Marshall, 2000), a lack of empathy for others (Craissati, McClurg, & Browne, 2002), or intimacy deficits (Ward et al., 1995).

Etiological theory

Taken together, research findings support the thesis that individuals who experience child maltreatment are likely to exhibit distorted internal working models of relationships, which result in poor social skills and poor emotional self-regulation. The lack of social skills, especially during adolescence, is likely to result in rejection by others, which in turn will decrease self-esteem, increase anger, and produce cognitive distortions about peers and relationships. Negative emotions combined with cognitive distortions may increase the intensity of sexual desire and deviant sexual fantasies. These developmental factors interact with disinhibiting factors (e.g., intoxication, stress, negative affect) and the presence of a potential victim to impair an individual's ability to control their behaviors, which in turn may result in a sexual offense.

Self-Regulation Model

The self-regulation model (SRM) contends that individuals are goal-directed as sexual abusers and offend to achieve a desired state—either to satisfy or to avoid offending. The model proposes that four pathways lead to sexual offending. Two pathways characterize offenders who attempt to avoid offending (avoidance oriented) but do not have adequate strategies (i.e., they have either underregulation or misregulation of self-control) to avoid the undesired behavior (the sexual offense). The two other pathways characterize individuals who seek to achieve goals associated with sexual offending (approach oriented) and experience positive feelings as a result. Research on SRM supports the validity of the model and its use in classification and treatment. Specifically, SRM pathways have been shown to differentiate offense characteristics and static and dynamic risk.

With respect to offense pathways, incest offenders have been shown to follow the avoidant-passive pathway (Bickley & Beech, 2002, 2003). Rapists are more likely to follow the approach-automatic pathway because their goal is to offend, but they offend impulsively to situational cues (Yates, Kingston, & Hall, 2003). Child sexual abusers who offend against male victims are more likely to follow the approach-explicit pathway; their goal is to offend and they carefully plan their offenses by establishing relationships with their victims (Simons & Tyler, 2010). The indiscriminate (or crossover) offenders who sexually assault both children and adults of both genders and from multiple relationships are more likely to follow the approach-automatic pathway (Simons, McCullar, & Tyler, 2008; Simons & Tyler, 2010).

Specialist vs. Generalist Model

The specialist vs. generalist model contends that sexual offenders may be characterized as specialists who commit sexual crimes persistently or as generalists who do not restrict themselves to one type of crime (Lussier, 2005). One of the assumptions of the traditional explanatory models of sex offending (i.e., the specialist) is that offenders who sexually abuse children engage in sexual offending exclusively. This model has been shown to have a distinct etiology—specifically, a history of childhood sexual abuse (Burton, 2003; Marshall & Marshall, 2000). Similarly to rapists, generalist (versatile) offenders resemble violent nonsexual

offenders (Craissati, 2005; Langstrom, Sjostedt & Grann, 2004; Simon, 2000). The generalist theory contends that offenders participate in a broad array of activities that are manifestations of low self-control and impulsivity (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

One recent study suggests that the majority of sexual offenders follow the generalist model (Harris, Mazerolle, & Knight, 2009). Both rapists and child sexual abusers in that study exhibited extensive criminal histories, substance abuse issues, antisocial tendencies, and psychosis. Few rapists in the study specialized in sexual crimes. Those who did were more likely to exhibit characteristics similar to child sexual abusers, such as sexual deviance and sexual preoccupation. Another recent study found that the specialist model was evident in child sexual abusers (Lussier, Proulx, and LeBlanc, 2005). These findings are consistent with many traditional typologies of rapists and child sexual abusers, and they suggest that the generalist vs. specialist model is a better way to assess sexual offenders, regardless of victim type.

Summary and Policy Implications

Overall, traditional typologies have demonstrated considerable problems, including inadequate definitions and inconsistent research findings. In addition, most of the typologies developed to date have failed to address treatment issues and predict recidivism (Camilleri & Quincy, 2008; Knight & Prentky, 1990). More recently, comprehensive descriptions of the psychological processes, developmental histories, and offense patterns of sexual deviance have been developed. Although they are not described as typologies per se, they have been shown to be related to different trajectories of offending and they are able to identify criminogenic needs, which have been shown to be predictive of sexual recidivism. Developmental factors have been shown to be predictive of high-risk sexual behaviors, treatment failure, and dynamic risk (Craissati & Beech, 2006), and the self-regulation model has been shown to be associated with static and dynamic risk for reoffense (Craissati & Beech, 2006). Studies also have shown that few sexual offenders "specialize" in sexual offending. Specialization has been associated with child sexual abusers who sexually prefer children, whereas rape has been associated with criminal versatility. The prevention of sexual violence requires a balance of community safety with effective resource allocation. Recent advances in our knowledge of developmental risk factors and offense pathways can assist with risk and need evaluation, but additional research is needed to develop more extensive models to explain sexual deviance.

Notes

1. Although other typologies exist, this Research Brief focuses on classification systems that have been empirically derived and validated. Two empirically validated typologies—Massachusetts Treatment Center: Child Molester Version 3 and Rapist Version 3 (Knight & Prentky, 1990)—were not included because some researchers (e.g., Barbaree et al., 1994; Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008; Hudson & Ward, 1997) have questioned their clinical utility.

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ABOUT SMART

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 authorized the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within OJP. SMART is responsible for assisting with implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals across the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.