

Child Molestation: Factors Related to Level of Violence

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ABSTRACT. Information from 363 convicted child molesters, housed in either a state correctional facility or an inpatient sex offender treatment program, was examined using legal, correctional, and treatment records to determine factors that differentiate violent child molesters from non-violent child molesters. Of this sample, 21% of the offenders were considered violent. Consistent with prior literature, multivariate analyses revealed that violent offenders were significantly younger, more likely to be unemployed, tended to be single, had committed their first sex crime at an earlier age, and had more total sex crime charges. Additionally, offenders were more sexually violent with strangers than immediate family members and with older victims compared to younger victims. Contrary to prior literature, violent child molesters were more likely to be married than divorced or widowed. These findings are particularly important considering the relationship between history of violence and recidivism. The results are discussed in relation to previous findings, difficulties in defining violence, and risk assessment. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Protecting the public from the politically controversial group of “sexually violent predators” has been the subject of recent federal legislation (Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 1998). In *Kansas v. Hendricks* (1997), the United States Supreme Court allowed involuntary civil commitment for sex offenders who have completed their sentences, but present an ongoing risk for violent sexual re-offense (Heilbrun, Nezu, Keeney, Chung, & Wasserman, 1998). At present, every state has laws requiring the registration of sex offenders, and most states require some level of community notification as well (Becker & Murphy, 1998).

Most research related to violent sex offenders has focused on delineating typologies of sex offenders, revealing factors related to recidivism, or considering level of violence solely among rapists. Few studies, however, have specifically examined which variables apply most strongly to sexual violence among child sex offenders. Greenberg, Bradford, and Curry (1996), for example, noted that the interrelationship of physical aggression and child molestation has not been clarified in the literature. Similarly, Quinsey and Lalumiere (1996) reported a lack of information regarding characteristics that might differentiate aggressive and non-aggressive child molesters.

The lack of clarification regarding the relationship between physical aggression and child molestation may be, in part, due to the relatively low level of violence and aggressive behavior believed to be exhibited by child molesters, as compared to rapists or other sex offenders toward adults (Okami and Goldberg, 1992). Greenberg et al. (1996) classified only 11.2% of their pedophilic subjects as having acted in a violent manner. Likewise, Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, and Christenson (1965) reported a comparable 12.2 percent of their heterosexual pedophile group as having displayed aggression during commission of the offense. Okami and Goldberg (1992), however, noted that the overall portrait of child molesters as a nonviolent, passive, and unassertive group is often grounded in clinical impression rather than empirical research.

While the level of violence displayed by child molesters is still significantly less than that displayed by rapists, sexual violence among child molesters may be much higher than commonly believed. Assumptions about absence of violence among child molesters may be due to lower rates of violent child molestation as compared to violent rape. They might also relate to beliefs of child molesters as being more cunning and manipulative than violent. The result, however, is that the in-

terrelationship among violence and child molestation is often neglected in the literature.

Estimating the level of aggression displayed by molesters during commission of the offense is confounded by the limited specificity of definitions utilized, as well as by the limited use of corroborating sources of information during classification. In fact, one study which made an exhaustive attempt to utilize information from a variety of sources found that 58% of the child molesters sampled used excessive physical force, compared to 71% of the rapists sampled (Abel, Becker, Murphy, & Flanagan, 1981). Unlike previous studies which included only acts of physical restraint or contact in their definition of aggression, this study also included threats of physical harm made toward the victim.

It is important to examine the level of violence displayed within acts of child molestation for a number of reasons. For one thing, violent child molesters are understudied as a group. This subgroup of violent child molesters may be qualitatively different from the larger group of non-violent child molesters. This information would be of particular importance to investigators or other law enforcement officials interested in delineating homogenous categories of offenders to aid in criminal apprehension or interrogation. Incorporating typological differences in risk assessment would also result in enhanced legal decision making.

Second, understanding how the level of violence relates to child molestation may help in predicting recidivism. There is evidence to suggest that among sex offenders, level of force correlates with risk of re-offending (for a review, see Schopp, Pearce, and Scalora, 1998). Child molesters in a 15-year follow-up study were shown to have a recidivism rate greater than 50%, which was higher than that of rapists (Harris et al., 1998). Another recent study of recidivism rates among sex offenders over a 25-year period revealed that 32-52% of child molesters committed sexual offenses after discharge (Prentky, Lee, Knight, and Cerce, 1997).

Considering available research which shows that not all sex offenders have an equal risk of re-offending, it may make sense to apply more restrictive measures to higher risk offenders than to lower risk offenders (Hanson, 1998). As the risk of recidivism is directly related to decisions about probation and parole, compulsory treatment, police registration, and community notification, it is essential to have empirical data to assist in making these decisions. This is particularly the case as child molesters as a group have been shown to be more likely to re-offend as

compared to other sex offenders, and because the variable history of violence has been shown to be a variable highly predictive of recidivism.

Finally, an "explosion" of sex offender registration and notification statutes has occurred within the last five years following the case of seven-year-old Megan Kanka, who was raped and murdered by the twice-convicted Jesse Timmendequas (Schopp et al., 1998). "Megan's Laws" assign offenders to tiers of risk in determining the level of community notification required (Simon, 1998). Recently, Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Program as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994). This statute threatens to withhold 10% of crime fighting funds from states that do not implement a sex offender registration system. Thus, sex offender registration statutes have essentially become federally mandated (Silva, 1995)

Given that differential assessment of risk is required for the purposes of some notification laws, it is essential that risk evaluators be equipped to answer questions about the level of risk that certain offenders pose to society. It is plausible that level of violence displayed within acts of child molestation can help in discriminating between more or less dangerous sex offenders, and hence result in better decisions about the level of community notification required.

This study is also relevant to the ever-increasing literature on profiling, or criminal behavioral analysis. Those involved in profiling devote considerable attention to the type and amount of physical force in a sex offense, as it is believed to be a key determinant of offender motivation. Force is often differentiated into severity levels including minimal, moderate, excessive, and brutal to help in understanding offender behavior (Hazelwood, 1983). This literature has also given attention to level of force as it is indicative of crime escalation. Escalation of violence during serial offenses reveals increasing dangerousness on the part of the offender from the profiler's perspective (Douglas, Ressler, Burgess, and Hartman, 1986).

Most of the profiling literature has analyzed sex offenses involving an extreme level of violence (Dietz et al., 1990; Douglas et al., 1986; Hazelwood, 1983; Lanning, 1994). While data on extreme violence is important, it is essential to also analyze sex offenses involving moderate levels of violence. Child molesters who employ less than an extreme level of violence make up the majority of cases and yet have been neglected, for the most part, in the profiling literature.

Although research is limited in terms of variables related to severity of violence among child molesters, there is related research on sex of-

fenders as a group that might help to clarify these issues. Prentky, Knight, Sims-Knight, Straus, Rokous, and Cerce (1989) found that childhood experiences, specifically familial sexual deviation and constancy of caregiver, predicted the severity of sexual aggression among 82 incarcerated sex offenders. Severity of sexual aggression was also predicted by sexual abuse history of the offender. However, a history of physical abuse or neglect did not contribute significantly to sexual aggression.

Barsetti, Earls, Lalumiere, and Belanger (1998) reported that intra-familial and extra-familial child molesters did not differ significantly in terms of penile response to depictions of violence, though both groups showed higher levels of deviant sexual arousal (including violence arousal) compared to a control group. Offender age has been shown to be related to violence; namely younger offenders are typically more violent than their older counterparts (National Institute of Mental Health, 1981). Vera et al. (1980) report that sexually nonviolent defendants are significantly older than groups of nonsexually violent and sexually violent defendants. Finally, the literature shows that marital status may also be related to sexual violence history. Vera et al. (1980) found that sexually violent defendants were more likely to be widowed or divorced, compared to sexually nonviolent defendants, who were more likely to be married.

This study examines factors that may differentiate physically aggressive child sex offenders from non-physically aggressive child molesters. For the purposes of this study, violent or aggressive actions, including threatened or actual physical coercion (such as physical violence, presentation/use of weapon, confinement or restraint) will be considered.

METHODS

Participants

For the purposes of this study, Lanning's (1987) definition of a child molester was used: "a significantly older individual who engages in any type of sexual activity with individuals legally defined as children" (p. 202). Records were reviewed on 363 convicted child molesters who were released from either a Nebraska correctional or inpatient treatment facility between 1991 and 1995. Offenders receiving treatment were housed in a secure inpatient treatment facility under the legal authority

of the Convicted Sex Offender Law (Neb Rev Stat '29-2922, Cum. Supp. 1998).

The treatment sample was housed within a 40 bed unit providing intensive cognitive-behavioral services to convicted child molesters and pedophiles who had either volunteered for treatment (approximately two-thirds) or had been civilly committed by the courts subsequent to completion of sentence (approximately one-third). The average length of stay for this male-only offender treatment program was 28.3 months. The comparison group involved a randomly selected sample of sex offenders who were convicted for similar crimes, incarcerated in the state correctional facilities, and later released during the same period. No significant differences were noted between the treatment and comparison groups related to either victim demographics, time discharged, or sentencing judges.

Procedure

Trained coders recorded offender legal, correctional, and treatment records, including presentence reports compiled by probation officers, treatment discharge summaries, police reports of the alleged offenses, and correctional classification studies. The intent was to obtain all available information relevant to offender demographics, legal processing (e.g., presence of plea-bargaining, probation officer recommendations), and offense characteristics (e.g., presence of violence, enticements used, grooming behavior, age/sex of victim, use of controlled substances). To determine whether force was utilized, coders reviewed multiple sources of data including defendant and victim statements to law enforcement and police reports detailing physical evidence of the event (e.g., details of injury to victim, presence of weapon).

We chose not to delineate among incremental levels of violence, and instead chose to classify force as either existent or nonexistent. While this sharp demarcation may be somewhat artificial, it is similar to how others have categorized force (Gebhard et al., 1965) and minimizes the number of arbitrary lines drawn among numerous levels of violence. Some authors, with the benefit of audiotape or other stimuli, have measured sex offenders' responses to very distinct levels of force portrayed in different scenarios (Barsetti et al., 1998; Lohr et al., 1997). However, this type of control is not possible when examining *actual* levels of violence within sex offenses that have already occurred.

If discrepancies were noted between perpetrator and victim statements with respect to whether or not force was utilized during the com-

mission of the crime, the victims' statements were used as the primary data source. To evaluate interrater reliability, 20 cases were randomly chosen from each sample and randomly coded by two research assistants. Interrater reliabilities were determined by calculating Pearson product-moment correlations for continuous variables and the kappa statistic for categorical variables. Statistical analyses indicated interrater reliabilities of .90 or greater.

RESULTS

Of the 363 convicted child molesters, 78 (21.5%) were classified as violent and 285 (78.5%) were classified as non-violent. Discriminant analyses were used to determine which variables discriminated between violent and non-violent groups of sex offenders. The model accounted for 12.81 percent of the variance between groups.

There was a relationship between marital status and presence of sexual violence ($\chi^2(3) = 7.99, p = .046$), with single offenders tending to be the most violent, followed by married offenders and divorced offenders (see Table 1). There was also a relationship between employment status and sexual violence ($\chi^2(1) = 8.95, p = .003$), with unemployed offenders showing a greater tendency toward violence than employed offenders (see Table 1). Additionally, the relationship between the victim and the offender was shown to have a significant pattern of relationship ($\chi^2(3) = 26.60, p = .000$), with offenses against strangers tending to be the most violent. Offenses against extended family were shown to be the next most violent, followed by offenses against acquaintances. Finally, violence against members of the immediate family was noted in only 11.8% of the cases (see Table 1). An offender's history of physical abuse did not relate significantly with sexual violence ($\chi^2(1) = .744, p = .388$), nor did an offender's history of sexual abuse victimization ($\chi^2 = 2.83, p = .092$; see Table 1). However, offenders who were not sexually or physically abused showed a greater tendency toward violence as compared to those with a history of abuse.

Non-violent offenders were found to be significantly older ($M = 37.41, SD = 12.53$) than violent offenders [$(M = 32.13, SD = 11.77), F(1, 325) = 10.15, p < .002$], have significantly younger victims ($M = 9.80, SD = 5.10$) than violent offenders [$(M = 12.31, SD = 10.83), F(1, 325) = 7.64, p = .006$], committed their first sex crime at a significantly older age, [$F(1, 325) = 7.99, p = .005$], and had fewer total sex crime charges brought against them [$F(1, 325) = 3.88, p = .05$] (see Table 2).

TABLE 1. Relationship Between Demographic Variables and Sexual Violence

	<i>Sexual Violence</i>	
	No	Yes
Marital Status^a		
Single	97 (71.3%)	39 (28.7%)
Married	103 (80.5%)	25 (19.5%)
Divorced	82 (85.4%)	14 (14.6%)
Widowed	3 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Employment Status^b		
Unemployed	182 (83.1%)	37 (16.9%)
Employed	88 (69.3%)	39 (30.7%)
Victim-Perpetrator Relationship^c		
Immediate Family	105 (88.2%)	14 (11.8%)
Extended Family	30 (71.4%)	12 (28.6%)
Acquaintance	123 (79.4%)	32 (20.6%)
Stranger	24 (53.3%)	21 (46.7%)
Offender Physically Abused ^d	68 (81.9%)	15 (18.1%)
Offender Sexually Abused ^e	52 (86.7%)	8 (13.3%)

^a (n = 363), $p < .05$

^b (n = 343), $p < .01$

^c (n = 361), $p < .001$

^d (n = 363)

^e (n = 363)

TABLE 2. Means, Standard Deviations and ANOVAs by Violence Group

Variables	Violence Group			
	Violent (n = 71)		Non-Violent (n = 256)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Offender Age	32.13	11.77	37.41	12.53**
Age of First Sex Crime	30.61	11.76	35.11	11.90**
Age of Victim	12.31	10.83	9.80	5.10**
Sex Crime Charges	.77	1.57	.48	.93*
Property Crime Charges	1.46	2.54	1.45	3.47
Person Crime Charges	.69	1.62	.61	1.33
Traffic Crime Charges	1.80	3.09	1.79	3.22
Total Charges	5.38	6.89	4.61	6.31

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

A discriminant analysis was conducted to determine which variables predicted sexual violence in this sample of child molesters. Inspection of the structure matrix shows that several variables have a strong predictive relationship to sexual violence: age, marital status, employment, total sex crime charges, relationship to victim, and age of victim. Using a cutoff of .30 or higher, as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (1983), examination of the standardized weights shows that employment, age of offender, age at first sex crime, age of victim, number of sex crime charges, and total number of charges each had a strong unique contribution to the model (see Table 3). Overall, this model correctly re-classified subjects 82.7% of the time, and accounted for 12.81% of the variance. Of the violent group, 22.8% were correctly classified and of the non-violent group, 98.6% were correctly classified.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal that violent and non-violent child molesters differ in several important respects and that violent child molesters are similar to other types of violent offenders. In relation to pre-

TABLE 3. Predictive Model of Child Molester Sexual Violence

	Standardized Canonical Coefficients	Structure Weights
Age of Victim	.568	.556
Employment Status	.422	.441
Relationship to Victim	.193	.397
Marital Status	-.229	-.396
Offender Age	-.837	-.328
Sex Crime Charges	.508	.327
Total Charges	.318	.165
Person Crime Charges	.089	.163
Age at First Sex Crime	.568	-.149
Defendant Sexually Abused	.068	.080
Defendant Physically Abused	.017	.070
Traffic Crime Charges	.268	.034
Property Crime Charges	.028	.019

Note. Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function.

vious research, our findings confirm that younger offenders are typically more violent than older offenders (NIMH, 1981; Vera et al., 1980). Our findings also confirm that non-violent sex offenders are more likely to be married than violent sex offenders. Contrary to the findings of Vera et al. (1980), the present study found that married offenders tended to be more violent than divorced or widowed offenders. While Quinsey, Harris, and Rice (1995) found offender history of sexual abuse to be an important predictive variable for sexual aggression, the current study did not find it helpful in discriminating between violent and non-violent groups of child molesters. However, in concordance with the above-mentioned study offender history of physical violence was not found to be useful in predicting level of violence. The fact that violent offenders tended to be younger, had more diverse criminal histories, and more diverse victims parallels other data related to characterological factors such as psychopathy (Hare, 1991; Serin, 1991). A previous history of sex crime charges discriminated between violent and non-violent offenders, which may reflect an escalating pattern of violence to which

Douglas et al. (1986) referred. Certainly, this finding warrants further research.

While several variables differentiated between violent and nonviolent molesters, the discriminant function displayed substantially more success in classifying nonviolent offenders. This finding suggests that violent molesters are a more diverse group, indicating several contributory factors, including a paraphilic interest fueled by violence, more intense control or sadistic motivation for the offense, or characterological factors such as psychopathy. Unfortunately, these factors were not examined in this study and need to be looked at in future studies.

Violence among child molesters may be an understudied or poorly understood issue for a variety of reasons. As mentioned earlier, many researchers and/or clinicians assume that child molesters resort only to innocuous methods such as bribery to coerce a child. As such, this group is generally considered non-violent, albeit inaccurately so. Erickson, Walbeck and Seely (1988) noted that due to age and size discrepancies between children and adults, the issue of coercion is moot, and hence victim injury is low. Such an assumption may encourage investigating professionals to assume that enticement or grooming behavior could occur exclusive of threatening behavior. The absence of violence is often assumed in cases of intrafamilial abuse, contrary to prior arousal research (Barsetti et al., 1998) as well as current findings. As a result of these false assumptions, individuals may not attend to the variable of violence when investigating, assessing, profiling, or treating child molesters. Based upon our findings and previous research, a significant portion of child molesters use threats or violence, and this group can be differentiated from their non-violent counterparts on a number of important dimensions.

The finding that over one-fifth of the child molesters in this sample were considered violent may be more in line with the conservative estimates of 11.2% (Okami and Goldberg, 1992) and 12.2% (Gebhard et al., 1965), than with the much higher rate of 71% observed by Abel and his colleagues (1981). There is a discrepancy in the level of violence reported among various samples of child molesters. Undoubtedly, these discrepancies are exacerbated by definitional problems. Higher estimates of molester violence tend to be observed when violence is defined to include a wide array of aggressive actions, such as verbal threats as opposed to definitions involving only physical contact. The present findings, however, corroborate beliefs of violent child molesters being a more sizable subgroup than generally assumed. The discrepancies may not only relate to how researchers define violence, but also

to the thoroughness of the methodology in classifying offenders based upon corroborating data from a variety of sources (e.g., offender self-report, victim statements, police reports).

In conclusion, it is important that clinicians be aware of the significant levels of violence in cases of child molestation, particularly as child molesters are more likely to have multiple victims compared to other sex offenders (Abel et al., 1981). Such an awareness of child molester violence also runs counter to implications in previous literature downplaying similarities between violent molesters and other violent offenders. Empirical knowledge related to the risk of violence and child molestation will unquestionably lead to refined investigatory strategies, enhanced legal decision making, and more informed risk assessment. The differences between violent and nonviolent offenders could certainly be of use to mental health professionals involved in risk assessment, suggesting that differential assessment of sex offenders is warranted.

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