An Exploration of Crossover Sexual Offending

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Abstract

Studies have produced equivocal findings regarding whether sex offenders are stable in their choice of victims. Indeed, it remains unclear whether a sex offender's subsequent victims are typically of the same gender, age range, and victim–perpetrator relationship as that of the initial victim. Although some differences may be attributed to methodological disparities, others are not. This study sought to clarify this question by examining the tendency of sex offenders to switch from one type of victim to another, both within an index offense and across offenses and all victims. Archival records of 789 incarcerated sex offenders were examined. Of those offenders who had multiple victims at the index offense ($n = 279$), 13% had victims of both genders, 14% had victims in different age categories (child, adolescent, and adult), and 13% had varying relationships with the victims (i.e., family member, acquaintance, or stranger). When the records of those with past sexual convictions were examined ($n = 208$), 20% of offenders had a prior victim of a different gender; 40% crossed over across age categories, and 48% of the repeat offenders had varying relationships with the victim across convictions. Offenders who had both male and female victims and offenders who had victims of varied relationship status across crimes had higher Static-99 risk scores than offenders who were more stable with regard to victim selection. These findings are compared to those of previous studies, focusing on how these results add clarity to a previous literature whose conclusions were challenged by the use of disparate sampling and research methodologies.

Keywords

sexual abuse, crossover, victim selection

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Sex offenders have long been classified on the basis of four offense characteristics: the age of the victim, the gender of the victim, the level of coercion used to commit the offense, and the type of victim–aggressor relationship (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christenson, 1965). Accordingly, common sex offender categorizations, such as pedophile, incest offender, child molester, and rapist, are defined by the age of the victim and the offender's relationship with the victim. Indeed, these characteristics appear to have predictive value, with victim age (adult vs. child), gender, and victim–aggressor relationship having each been found to be related to a sex offender's risk for recidivism (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). However, categorizing sex offenders by victim characteristics is based on the assumption that sex offenders are stable in their choice of victims. Although the use of such discrete categories to describe sex offenders is common (e.g., Barbaree, Seto, Langton, & Peacock, 2001; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Proulx, Perrault, & Ouimet, 1999; Sample & Bray, 2006; Smallbone & Wortley, 2004), relatively few studies have explored the prevalence of victim choice polymorphia.[1] Extant research findings are, however, equivocal with regard to whether offenders generally display stability in victim choice across sex crimes (e.g., Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003; Marshall, Barbaree, & Eccles, 1991; Weinrott & Saylor, 1991).

The extent to which sex offenders are more specialist or generalist in their offending patterns may have important implications for sex offender legislation based on victim selection. For example, research has suggested that intrafamilial child molesters present a lower risk of reoffense than sex offenders with other types of victims (e.g., Hanson & Bussiere, 1998), and consequently, they may be more likely to be assigned to a lower risk or community supervision level upon release. However, some literature has indicated that a majority of incest offenders also victimize extrafamilial children (Heil et al., 2003); suggesting risk classification based on only the most recent sex crime could underestimate an offender's risk level. Although restrictions placed on released sex offenders typically reflect offending history, these restrictions could be inadequate if offenders show variability in future offending. For instance, an offender who perpetrated an offense against a child may be forbidden from residing in the vicinity of a playground or other child-dense community structure under current residence restriction legislation, whereas someone who perpetrated an offense against an adult may not be subject to such restrictions. However, if victim choice is not a stable characteristic, then a sex offender who has previously committed crimes against adults could also pose a significant risk to children. Levenson, Becker, and Morin (2008) suggest that it is particularly important to understand crossover offending patterns to enhance evidence-based safety planning for offenders and community members.

Traditionally victim age categories have been defined as "child" or "adult." Some recent studies, however, suggest that using the broader category of "child" may underestimate the age range of victims against which a perpetrator may offend (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Sample & Bray, 2006; Sim & Proeve, 2010). Although widely debated, the category of hebephilia has been used to denote an attraction to pubescent

children (Blanchard et al., 2009).[2] By differentiating between pre- and post-pubescent children, analyses have elucidated a propensity for some perpetrators to offend indiscriminately across these age categories.

Several studies have found that a significant proportion of sex offenders shift victim type, committing sexual offenses against a wide assortment of victims (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittleman, & Rouleau, 1988; Abel, Becker, & Mittleman, 1987; Bradford, Boulet, & Pawlak, 1992). For example, Heil and colleagues (2003) found that relatively few of the incarcerated offenders in their sample had abused only one type of victim (11%) and 70% admitted to having both adult and child victims. Furthermore, Heil et al. found that 78% of the incarcerated sex offenders in their sample—who were thought previously to have only molested children—also admitted to the sexual victimization of adults. Similarly, Weinrott and Saylor (1991) found that 32% of a sample of sex offenders officially classified as rapists reported that they had engaged in sexual conduct with a child, whereas approximately 12% of those classified as child molesters admitted to having at least one adult victim. Moreover, 34% of those classified as extrafamilial child molesters also admitted to perpetrating an incest offense and 50% of the known incest offenders admitted to undetected abuse of extrafamilial children. Finally, Levenson and colleagues (2008) reported that 22% of the offenders in their sample of child molesters had victims of both genders, whereas 26% had both child and adult victims. However, it should be noted that offenders with younger victims (aged 6 and younger) were 3 times more likely to have victims of both genders than a sex offender with older victims.

Whereas the above findings seem to suggest more generalist patterns of offending among sex offenders, other research has found that sex offenders remain relatively stable with regard to victim selection (Cann, Friendship, & Gonza, 2007; Guay, Proulx, Cusson, & Ouimet, 2001; Marshall et al., 1991). Although some of these differences may be attributed to methodology (criminal records vs. self-report and polygraphy), these methodological variations do not seem to fully explain the pattern of discrepancies across studies.

Whereas the aforementioned studies all explored crossover rates among sexual offenders, important sampling differences preclude the synthesis of these disparate study findings. For instance, Marshall et al. (1991) reported low levels of crossover offending using a sample of 129 child molesters attending an outpatient clinic, only 14% of whom had a history of adjudication for a sexual offense. In contrast, Levenson et al. (2008) reported a higher incidence of crossover offending but used a sample of 362 sexual offenders referred for civil commitment and deemed more dangerous than the general sex offender population.

Even among studies examining incarcerated sexual offenders, fundamental differences in sampling criteria may have influenced whether low versus high rates of victim-choice polymorphia were found. Both Cann et al. (2007) and Guay et al. (2001) included only individuals convicted of offending against more than one victim, and both of these studies reported comparatively low rates of victim-choice polymorphia. Alternatively, Weinrott and Saylor (1991) and Heil et al. (2003) recruited participants

from incarcerated populations without limiting the sample to those convicted of offending against multiple victims, and both reported high rates of crossover. The less restrictive inclusion criteria used by Weinrott and Saylor and Heil et al. may account, in part, for the discrepancies in rates of crossover as compared to that of Cann et al. and Guay et al. The full implications of these sampling disparities are unknown, and further exploration can offer clarity.

Despite divergence regarding the prevalence of crossover offending, several studies have begun to examine risk factors for these behaviors. Olver, Wong, Nicholaichuk, and Gordon (2007) found that mixed offenders (those showing victim-choice polymorphia in one or more category of victim selection) scored higher than sex offenders who were exclusive rapists (having victims aged ≥ 14), child molesters, and incest offenders on both the Static-99 (Hanson & Thornton, 2000) and the Violence Risk Scale—Sexual Offender Version (VRS-SO; Olver et al., 2007). In addition, in a sample of civilly committed sex offenders, Jackson and Richards (2007) found that those offenders who had adult-only or mixed-age victims scored higher on the Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide (SORAG; Quinsey, Rice, & Harris, 1995) than offenders who had exclusively child victims. Furthermore, mixed offenders scored significantly higher than both child molesters and rapists on the Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool—Revised (Mn-SOST-R; Epperson, Kaul, Huot, Hesselton, & Alexander, 2000).

Although the evidence suggests that crossover offending patterns may be more prevalent among convicted sex offenders than might be assumed, the aforementioned sampling issues make interpretation of discrepant findings difficult. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research examining whether certain risk factors may be associated with victim-choice polymorphia. Consequently, the appropriateness of using victim characteristics as the basis for sex offender classification remains unclear, and the implications of victim-choice polymorphia for predicting risk of recidivism are not fully understood. Thus, the aim of the current study is twofold: (a) to add to the existing research on the prevalence of victim crossover among sex offenders by addressing sampling issues and expanding age categories (child, adolescent, and adult victims), and (b) to examine risk variables in an effort to determine which characteristics best differentiate offenders who demonstrate victim-choice polymorphia from those who remain stable in victim selection. It is hypothesized that offenders who cross over in one or more category of victim selection will score higher on risk assessment measures than those offenders who remain stable in victim selection; these polymorphous sex offenders, in turn, will pose a greater overall risk of reoffense within the community.

Method

Using a retrospective cohort design, archival data were gathered from the files of all male offenders who were convicted of a sex crime and who were released from a state prison-based sex offender treatment facility in between the years 1996 and 2007 (*N* = 789). The facility from which the offenders were released is a prison dedicated solely to the

treatment of sexual offenders who, at the time of sentencing, were determined by the courts to be *repetitive, compulsive*, and *amenable to treatment*. Files from all offenders released during this time period were included for analysis.

Data were extracted from offender files by trained graduate-level students and coded onto a data collection tool. The files generally contained a record of criminal history (i.e., "rap sheets"), index offense police reports, psychiatric reports, prison records, posttreatment records, and intake and termination reports. For the purposes of this study, variables related to current and past crimes such as victim age, victim gender, and the nature of offense were collected, as well as the scores from therapist-rated risk assessment measures contained in the file. In order to make comparisons with previous research, victim age was separated into three categories: children (<13 years), adolescents (13-17 years), and adult (>17 years).

Participants

The average age of offenders at the time of the index offense was 36.5 years (*SD* = 12.3). More than half of the sample participants (56.4%, *n* = 443) were identified as White, not Hispanic, and 24% (*n* = 190) were identified as Black, not Hispanic and 18% (*n* = 143) as Hispanic. The rest of the sample participants (*n* = 10) were identified as Asian, American Indian, or Other. Almost half of the participants were married or living with a partner at the time of the index offense (44.5%, *n* = 349), and most had children (67.9%, *n* = 533). Most participants had obtained a GED or completed high school (60.5%, *n* = 475) and were employed prior to incarceration (81.6%, *n* = 639). Of the 789 offenders in the sample, 89% (*n* = 703) had an index offense of child molestation, 6% (*n* = 43) had an index offense of adult sexual assault, and the remainder (6%, *n* = 43) had a noncontact sexual offense. Twenty-seven percent (*n* = 208) were convicted of a past sex crime (not including the index offense). On average, offenders had 1.6 victims (*range* = 1-22).

Measures

Static-99 (Hanson & Thornton, 2000). The Static-99 is a measure of actuarial risk that was derived by combining the four items from the RRASOR (Hanson, 1997) with six items from the unpublished Structured Anchored Clinical Judgment Scale (Grubin, 1998) and can be scored based on archival records alone. Total scores range from 0 to 12 and are translated into risk levels ranging from 0 (*lowest*) to 6 (*highest*). Numerous studies have found that the Static-99 has moderate accuracy in predicting both sexual and violent recidivism (Barbaree et al., 2001; Hanson & Thornton, 2000; Nunes, Firestone, Bradford, Greenberg, & Broom, 2002). Offenders were compared on total Static-99 scores as well as on the 10 individual items scores. This measure, completed by therapeutic or corrections staff as part of risk assessment procedures, was coded from the offenders' files.

Results

Given the exploratory nature of this study, group differences on Static-99 total scores and individual Static-99 items were tested using independent-sample *t* tests and chi-square tests, as recommended by Huberty and Morris (1989). The *p* values are reported so the significance of differences at Bonferroni-adjusted alpha levels (.005) may be understood for the multiple-item comparisons.

Two sets of analyses were conducted in an effort to address the methodological disparities of previous research. First, the records of offenders convicted of having offended against more than one victim at the index offense were examined to test whether there were differences in gender, age, or victim–offender relationship within the set of offenses at the index offense. The index offense was determined to be the sex offense for which the offender was incarcerated and subsequently released between the years 1996 and 2007. Second, repeat offenders (those who had a sex crime conviction prior to the index offense) were assessed to determine whether there were differences in the gender, age, and relationship with the victim between the prior offense(s) and the index offense. Finally, we examined victim crossover for all offenders who had more than one offense in their criminal history. These separate analyses, which allow for more direct comparison with previous studies, aimed to establish patterns of converging evidence about rates of victim crossover.

Gender of Victims at Index Offense

Of the offenders whose index offense involved more than one victim (36%, *n* = 279), 24% (*n* = 63) had only male victims, 64% (*n* = 169) had only female victims, and 13% (*n* = 34) had both male and female victims. Those offenders who had both male and female victims (mixed gender) at the index offense scored slightly higher on the Static-99 (*M* = 2.4, *SD* = 1.3) than offenders who had exclusively same-gender victims *(M* = 2.2, *SD* = 1.8); however, these differences were not statistically significant (see Table 1). Of the 10 Static-99 individual items, only the *any male victims* item produced significant differences between groups (Fisher's Exact Test, *p* < .001; odds ratio [OR] with 95% confidence interval [95% CI] = 72.51 [9.72, 540.67]), which was expected as the item assesses the presence of male victims.

Age of Victims at Index Offense

When examining offenders whose index offense involved more than one victim, 38 offenders (14%) had perpetrated offenses against both adults and children, adolescents and children, or adolescents and adults (children aged < 13 years, adolescents aged 13-17 years, adults aged ≥ 18 years). There was no significant difference in Static-99 total scores between those offenders who had victims of different ages (*M* = 1.9, *SD* = 1.3) and those whose victims fell within the same age category (*M* = 2.2, *SD* = 1.8; see Table 1). There were also no significant differences between groups on any of the individual items on the Static-99.

Table 1. Static-99 Scores of Crossover and Non-crossover Sex Offenders.

Variables	No Crossover			Crossover			Analysis	
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	z	p
Index offense								
Gender	227	2.2	1.8	33	2.4	1.3	1.28	.202
Age	227	2.2	1.8	36	1.9	1.3	0.74	.463
Relationship	227	2.2	1.8	36	2.7	1.5	1.98	.048
Across offenses								
Gender	138	3.6	2.0	36	4.2	1.8	1.80	.073
Age	87	3.4	2.0	56	3.9	2.0	1.25	.212
Relationship	86	3.6	2.0	83	3.9	1.9	1.06	.289
All multiple offenders								
Gender	338	2.6	2.0	69	3.3	1.8	2.84	.005
Age	305	2.6	1.9	89	3.1	2.0	2.35	.019
Relationship	300	2.4	1.9	122	3.4	1.9	4.50	<.001

Note: Two-tailed Mann–Whitney *U* tests. Means and standard deviations reported to facilitate interpretation.

To facilitate comparison of our findings to those of previous research, we also collapsed adolescent and child victim categories and analyzed crossover offending between adult (aged ≥ 18 years) and child victims (aged < 18 years). A second supplemental analysis excluded those who had offended against adolescents and examined cross-over between child (aged < 13 years) and adult (aged ≥ 18 years) victims. These analyses served two purposes. They reduced reliance on findings using somewhat arbitrary cut points, for example, age 13, to distinguish between adolescent and child victims. They also allowed for more meaningful comparison with the extant literature in which adolescent and child victims are not discriminated. Only 1% (*n* = 3) of offenders in our sample had both adult and child victims during the index offense, when child victim was defined as those aged 17 and younger. When adolescents were excluded, only one offender had both a child victim below age 13 and an adult victim. There were no differences in Static-99 scores between those offenders who had child (aged < 18 years) and adult victims (*M* = 1.7, *SD* = 1.5) and those whose victims fell within the same age category (*M* = 2.2, *SD* = 1.7; see Table 2). No statistics or analyses are presented for the comparison between adult and child crossover offenders when adolescents were excluded given the aforementioned low (*n* = 1) comparison group size.

Relationship With Victim at Index Offense

Of the offenders whose index offense involved more than one victim, 46% (*n* = 126) offended exclusively against family members (operationally defined as a biological or stepchild or an extended biological family member such as niece or nephew); 26% (*n* = 72) offended exclusively against acquaintances (someone known longer than 24 hr though unrelated to the offender), and 11% (*n* = 29) offended exclusively

Table 2. Static-99 Scores of Offenders Who Crossed Over From Child to Adult Victims.

Variables	No Crossover			Crossover			Analysis	
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	z	p
Index offense	260	2.2	1.7	3	1.7	1.5	0.37	.71
Across offenses	125	3.5	1.9	28	4.2	2.3	1.35	.18
All multiple offenders	360	2.6	1.9	34	4.0	2.3	3.52	.0004
Index offense[a]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Across offenses[a]	80	3.4	1.9	13	3.8	1.8	0.76	.45
All multiple offenders[a]	277	2.6	1.8	14	3.5	1.9	1.97	.05

[a]Analysis excludes adolescent victims. Child defined as aged < 13.

against strangers (known less than 24 hr). These three groups were collapsed into what we termed the "consistent relationship" group ($n = 227$), given that they exclusively offended within one victim relationship category. Slightly more than one tenth of this sample (14%, $n = 36$) offended against *both* family members and acquaintances or against *both* strangers and family members.

Those who had victims in more than one relationship category ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.5$) had significantly higher Static-99 scores than those in the consistent relationship category ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.8$; see Table 1). A significant difference was also found between groups on the Static-99 item assessing unrelated victims (Fisher's Exact Test, $p < .001$; OR [95% CI] = 13.01 [3.05, 55.42]); however, this was expected due to relationship crossover.

History of Sex Crimes

Examination of records from the 789 offenders for whom data were available revealed that 208 (27%) were convicted of a past sex crime (not including the index offense). The following analyses examined victim-choice polymorphia for the repeat offenders only, comparing victim typology of past sex crimes to that of the index offense.

Gender of victim for repeat offenders. For those repeat offenders for whom the gender of the victim was available ($n = 182$), 65% ($n = 118$) had exclusively female victims, 14% ($n = 26$) had exclusively male victims, and 21% ($n = 38$) had both male and female victims. For the purposes of further analyses, those offenders who had both male and female victims at one conviction and then either male or female victims exclusively for the other conviction were considered to have crossed over in the category of victim gender.

Conditional probabilities were calculated to determine the likelihood that an offender with a prior male victim would have a female victim at the index offense and also to assess the probability that an offender with a prior female victim would subsequently have a male victim at the index offense. Of those who had male victims, the probability that they had another male victim was 78%, whereas the probability that they had a female victim at the index offense was 22%. Of the offenders who had a

prior sexual conviction with a female victim, there was a 95% chance that the subsequent victim was a female, and a 5% probability that it was a male. Additional conditional probabilities were calculated using Bayes' theorem (Lowry, 2012). These calculations showed that offenders having a male victim at index had an 18% probability of having a prior female victim and offenders against a female victim at index had a 7% to 8% chance of having a prior male victim.

A comparison of scores on the Static-99 revealed that those offenders who had victims of both genders tended to score higher than those who consistently offended against same-gender victims (see Table 1). However, the Static-99 total scores were artificially elevated by the fact that all those offenders who had offended against both genders necessarily offended against a male, thus scoring a 1 on that particular item. When this item was removed from the Static-99 total, the difference between groups no longer trended toward significance. Besides scoring significantly higher on the *any male victims* item, offenders who had both male and female victims were less likely to have a prior conviction for nonsexual violence than those offenders who were exclusive with regard to victim gender ($\chi^2 = 4.7$, $df = 1$, $p = .03$).

Age of victim for repeat offenders. Of the 150 repeat offenders for whom data were available, 49% ($n = 74$) had exclusively child victims across all convictions, 4% ($n = 6$) had exclusively adult victims across all convictions, and 4% ($n = 6$) had exclusively adolescent victims across convictions. Forty-three percent ($n = 64$) had victims of different age categories across offenses. The conditional probability that a repeat offender would have victims of different age categories across crimes in this sample was 10.5%. For the subset of individuals who offended exclusively against either adults or children less than 18 years of age in the index offense, additional conditional probabilities were calculated using Bayes' theorem (Lowry, 2012). According to these calculations, an offender with an adult victim at index offense has a 30% chance of having a prior child victim, though an offender with a child victim at index offense has only a 15% chance of having a prior adult victim.

There were no significant differences on the Static-99 between those offenders who offended against victims in different age categories ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.0$) and those who did not ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 2.0$; see Table 1). Those who had victims in distinct age categories across offenses were less likely to be related to the victims ($\chi^2 = 5.79$, $df = 1$, $p = .02$) than those who offended exclusively against either adult or child victims.

Supplemental analyses with redefined child categories showed that 18% ($n = 28$) of offenders crossed over from adult to child or from child to adult victims across offenses, when child victims were more broadly defined as those aged 17 and younger. When adolescents were excluded, only 14% ($n = 13$) of individuals had both a child victim below age 13 and an adult victim. There was no difference in Static-99 scores between those offenders who had child (aged < 18 years) and adult victims ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 2.3$) and those whose victims fell within the same age category ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.9$). Nor were there Static-99 total score differences between adult and child crossover offenders ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.8$) and those who did not cross over age categories ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.9$) when adolescents were excluded (see Table 2).

Relationship With Victim for Repeat Offenders

Of the repeat sex offenders for whom victim relationship data were available (*n* = 177), 52% (*n* = 92) had the same type of victim (relative, acquaintance, or stranger) across offenses and 48% (*n* = 85) were observed to have victims of different relationship status across offenses. The conditional probability of a repeat offender having victims of different relationship status in this sample was 12.7%. We calculated additional conditional probabilities using Bayes' theorem to determine the likelihood of cross-over from a related victim to a stranger victim (Lowry, 2012). According to these calculations, an offender whose index offense involved a family member would have a 10% to 11% chance of having a prior stranger victim, whereas an offender whose index offense involved a stranger would have a 19% chance of having a prior family victim.

There were no significant differences on Static-99 total scores between those offenders who had victims of differing relationship status (*M* = 3.9, *SD* = 1.9) and those who did not (*M* = 3.6, *SD* = 2.0; see Table 1). Upon closer examination of item-level differences, the group that had victims of varied relationship status was less likely to have had male victims (χ^2 = 5.5, *df* = 1, *p* = .02) than those who offended exclusively against victims of a particular relationship status.

Combined Analyses for Offenders With More Than One Victim in Their Criminal History

When examining combined data from past and index offenses, 54% (*n* = 429) of offenders had more than one victim in their criminal history (including index).

Gender of victims. Of the offenders who had multiple victims, 17% (*n* = 69) had both male and female victims. Those offenders who had both male and female victims (mixed gender) scored significantly higher on the Static-99 (*M* = 3.3, *SD* = 1.8) than offenders who had exclusively same-gender victims (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 2.0). The only significant difference found between groups on any of the individual items of the Static-99 was found on the male victim item (χ^2 = 93.79, *df* = 1, *p* < .01), which was, again, as expected. When this item was removed the difference between groups was no longer significant, suggesting that the difference in the Static-99 total scores between offenders with victims of mixed gender and those with exclusively male or female victims was attributable to this item.

Age of victims. Twenty-three percent (*n* = 89) of offenders with more than one victim in their criminal history had victims in different age categories. Those offenders who had victims in distinct age categories had significantly higher Static-99 total scores (*M* = 3.1, *SD* = 2.0) than those who offended exclusively against victims in one age category (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.9; see Table 1). Those who had victims in varying age categories were less likely to be related to the victims (χ^2 = 6.36, *df* = 1, *p* = .01) than those who offended exclusively against one age group. These groups also differed on convictions for a noncontact sex offense (χ^2 = 8.53, *df* = 1, *p* = .01), the number of prior

sex offense charges ($\chi^2 = 9.89$, *df* = 3, *p* = .02), and the number of prior sex offense convictions ($\chi^2 = 8.93$, *df* = 3, *p* = .03).

When a child victim was defined as any victim aged 17 or younger, 9% (*n* = 34) of offenders in our sample crossed over from an adult to child or child to adult victim. When adolescents were excluded, only 5% (*n* = 14) of individuals had both a child victim below age 13 and an adult victim. Those offenders with victims from distinct age categories had significantly higher Static-99 scores (*M* = 4.0, *SD* = 2.3) than those offenders who had exclusively child (aged < 18 years) or adult victims (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.9; see Table 2). When adolescents were excluded, the difference between Static-99 scores among those with child (aged 12 and younger) and adult victims (aged 18 and older; *M* = 3.5, *SD* = 1.9) trended to be higher than those among individuals with either child or adult victims (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.8; see Table 2).

Relationship with victim for repeat offenders. Of the offenders with multiple victims, 29% (*n* = 122) had victims of different relationship status. Relationship crossover offenders scored significantly higher on the Static-99 (*M* = 3.4, *SD* = 1.9) than those offenders who exclusively perpetrated against victims within one relationship category (*M* = 2.4, *SD* = 1.9; see Table 1). Upon closer examination of item-level differences, a smaller proportion of the group that had victims of varied relationship status had male victims ($\chi^2 = 6.46$, *df* = 1, *p* = .01) than those who offended exclusively against victims of a particular relationship status. Groups also differed on the number of prior sex offense charges ($\chi^2 = 33.16$, *df* = 3, *p* < .001) and the number of prior sex offense convictions ($\chi^2 = 34.21$, *df* = 3, *p* < .001) as well as on convictions for a non-contact sex offense ($\chi^2 = 7.06$, *df* = 1, *p* = .008). Offenders who crossed over were also more likely to have a greater number of prior sentencing dates ($\chi^2 = 4.56$, *df* = 1, *p* = .03). Crossover offenders were also more likely to have offended against a stranger ($\chi^2 = 9.62$, *df* = 1, *p* < .002) and an unrelated victim ($\chi^2 = 22.83$, *df* = 1, *p* < .001). These differences were expected due to relationship crossover.

Discussion

Although studies have examined the extent to which sex offenders show stability in victim choice, disparate sampling methodologies have limited our ability to draw meaningful conclusions from the literature. In an attempt to bring greater clarity to the question of how frequently offenders engage in crossover sexual offenses, this study used a large sample drawn from a statewide examination of convicted sex offenders to examine the prevalence of victim-choice polymorphia. First, all sex offenders who had multiple victims at their index offense were examined. Next, we analyzed victim-choice polymorphia across crimes (whether there was a change in victim type from past crimes to index crime), and finally, we examined victim crossover for any offender who had more than one victim in their criminal history. Furthermore, risk factors were identified that differentiate offenders who exhibited stable victim selection from those whose victim selection was variable using each of these three methods of comparison. Overall findings revealed that relatively few offenders offended

against victims of both genders (17%), both for those who had multiple victims at the index offense (13%) and for those who were repeat offenders (21%). With regard to age preferences across crimes 23% of sex offenders had victims in distinct age categories. At the index offense, 14% of offenders had a conviction that included child and adult victims, child and adolescent victims, or adolescent and adult victims, whereas 40% of the repeat offenders had some combination of child, adolescent, and adult victims across convictions (between past and index offense). When crossover between child and adult victims was examined collapsing the child and adolescent categories (child aged < 18 years, adult aged ≥ 18 years), only 9% of offenders had victims from both age categories, and when adolescents were excluded from this analysis only 5% of offenders crossed over from child to adult victims (child aged ≤ 12 years, adult aged ≥ 18 years). Finally, when considering the relationship between the offender and the victim, 13% of offenders who had more than one victim at the index offense had victims of distinct relationship categories (i.e., family member, acquaintance, or stranger), whereas 48% of the repeat offenders offended against victims of different relationship categories across convictions. In total, 29% of those offenders with multiple victims had victims from discrete relationship categories. Offenders who crossed over with regard to victim relationship tended to score higher on the Static-99 than those offenders whose victim selection remained stable, but these differences were not statistically significant. Only those offenders who had varied relationships with victims in the index offense and those who had victims of both genders across offenses scored significantly higher on the Static-99, though these differences were likely attributable to the elevations on individual items measuring *unrelated victims* and *any male victims*, respectively.

The findings of this study suggest that sex offenders remain relatively stable with regard to victim gender, though offenders may be less stable with regards to age of their victims and their relationship to victims across crimes. Indeed, almost half (48%) of the offenders in this sample had victims of a different relationship status across crimes, whereas 40% of offenders had victims from different age groups across crimes when we distinguished between those with child, adolescent, and adult victims. Although these findings are similar to those of previous research that has found offenders to be relatively stable with regard to victim gender (Cann et al., 2007; Guay et al., 2001; Marshall et al., 1991), current findings suggest that offenders are much more variable in their selection of victims based on age and relationship status.

As suggested by recent findings (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Sample & Bray, 2006; Sim & Proeve, 2010), our results indicate that examining crossover using only the broad categories of adult (18 and older) and child (younger than 18) may underestimate the degree of crossover. In this study we found that when we collapsed the adolescent and child categories only 9% of offenders had victim crossover between children and adults, as compared to 40% when we examined crossover between children, adolescents, and adults. Arguably, these age cutoffs are arbitrary. Still, the literature suggests that sex offenders have preferences for either pre- or post-pubertal victims. Given that the age at which children go through puberty can vary significantly, it

should be noted that it appears that perpetrators who have victims in more than one age category (child, adolescent, adult) are more likely to offend against both adolescents and children than against both adults and children, potentially suggesting that victims should be classified according to pubertal status and physical characteristics (appears more child-like or adult-like) than age alone. However, this supposition is in contrast to the findings of Heil and colleagues (2003), who defined childhood as those below age 15 and found that 70% of inmates admitted to offending against both adults and children as compared to only 9% in our sample (using a definition of childhood as below 18). It should be noted that Heil and colleagues used postconviction polygraph testing, which tends to increase rates of self-reported offending (Grubin & Madsen, 2006; Kokish, Levenson, & Blasingame, 2005) although this still would not likely account for the large disparity between our findings. Bourke and Hernandez (2009), who used age criteria more similar to that used in the present study, found that 67% of participants offended against children and adolescents, a number similar to that found by Heil and colleagues despite the disparity in age classifications. However, Bourke and Hernandez also used self-report and polygraph testing in data collection. Clearly more research using similar definitions of victim age and similar methodologies (with or without polygraphy) is needed to further assess these differences.

Our findings suggest that offenders show variation with regard to their relationship to the victim. Indeed, 48% of the offenders in our sample had victims in more than one relationship category (i.e., relative, acquaintance, stranger) across offenses, though only 13% showed relationship crossover at the index offense. Although lower, the across-crime findings are comparable to rates of crossover observed by Heil et al. (2003), who found that 64% of the incest offenders in their sample had also victimized extrafamilial children. It should be noted however that in this study we used a broad definition of family, encompassing biological and stepchildren as well as nieces and nephews; with a more narrow definition of family we may have observed higher rates of crossover. This has implications within the context of the current research literature on recidivism. Two seminal meta-analyses (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005) found that incest offenders had lower rates of recidivism than rapists and nonfamilial child molesters. Given that a more varied offending history may indicate higher risk, it is important that evaluators attempt to gather a complete history of both detected and undetected sexual offenses. Indeed, enhanced efforts to obtain a more comprehensive criminal history will allow for the development of more accurate offender risk profiles as well as more effective risk management strategies.

It was hypothesized that offenders who crossed over in more than one category of victim selection would score higher on risk assessment instruments than those offenders who remained stable in victim selection. This hypothesis found mixed support. Contrary to the findings of Olver et al. (2007), there were relatively few differences between offenders who changed victim preference and those who did not on overall measures of static risk. Although some total score differences emerged, these differences seemed attributable to items on the Static-99 that directly assess gender and relationship to the victim. Thus, higher scores may not implicate crossover offenders

as a higher risk per se but rather reflect the higher risk inherent to offenders with male and unrelated victims.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. First, the sample used in this study was selected from a prison dedicated to the treatment of sexual offenders found to meet particularly statutory criteria (i.e., repetitive, compulsive, and amenable to treatment). Thus, this group of offenders may not be representative of all convicted sex offenders. Moreover, whereas the prevalence of sex offenders with exclusively child victims within an incarcerated sex offender population has been observed to be approximately 68% (Jeglic & Mercado, 2008), the vast majority of the sex offenders in this sample were convicted exclusively of crimes against child victims (89%), with few having exclusively adult victims (6%). This study, therefore, may have overrepresented sex offenders with an index offense against a child. Future research that includes a more general prison population might increase the generalizability of the findings. In addition, there is some research suggesting that sex offenders who have very young victims (below age 6) may be more likely to have both male and female victims. However, as noted above, these findings were based only on sex crimes for which there were official records and thus likely underrepresent the number of offenders who actually engaged in victim-choice polymorphia. Finally, these findings are cross-sectional in nature and many offenders who were deemed to be stable in their victim choice (or who did not have multiple victims or offenses) may have reoffended subsequent to release. Following these offenders prospectively could yield valuable information pertaining to victim selection across time.

The findings of this study enable meaningful comparison with the previous crossover literature through our examination of victim crossover based on both index crimes and criminal history and through consideration of alternative definitions of age. Furthermore, they highlight areas that require further investigation, including definitional variability (hebephilia/hebophila) and how victim-choice polymorphia is assessed. In addition, these findings underscore the importance of a comprehensive criminal history for the development of risk profiles and management strategies. These assumptions about the stability of sex offender typologies may in fact lead clinicians and those involved with placement decisions and community supervision to ascribe less risk to a particular offender based on his or her offending pattern than is warranted. It is hoped that these findings, which advance our understanding about the prevalence of victim crossover, highlight the need for more individualized and comprehensive evaluation of offenders, which ultimately might enhance the safety of our communities.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Victim choice polymorphia refers to an offender's propensity to offend against victims across the categories of age, gender, and victim–aggressor relationship.
2. It is worth noting that Sample and Bray (2006) have used a category of "hebophilia," which included charges for the sexual penetration of youth 13 to 18 years of age. This is not consistent with the traditional conception of "hebephilia," which refers to sexual attraction to pubescent children approximately between the ages of 11 and 14.

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