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**Foreword** | *There is significant interest in the issue of child sexual abuse committed in institutional settings. This study uses information collected from a sample of 23 convicted Canadian sex offenders to examine key elements of the offending. Issues explored include the nature of the offender's involvement with institutions, their own prior sexual victimisation experiences, factors influencing the selection of victims and the locations where the sexual assaults occurred. Particularly telling was the length of time offenders spent at an institution prior to initiating the assaults and the potential to avert offending by reducing opportunities to offend, as well as the associated danger evident in allowing staff—without supervision—to transport children outside of an institutional setting, given the frequency of the assaults that occurred offsite.*

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## Adult sex offenders in youth-oriented institutions: Evidence on sexual victimisation experiences of offenders and their offending patterns

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Currently, minimal research has been conducted worldwide on the phenomenon of child sexual abuse in youth-oriented institutions, despite increasing number of accounts that are coming to the attention of authorities and the wider public on these sex crimes. Addressing the lack of research on these offenders and how they offend is critical in developing evidence-based knowledge that can better guide effective policies. One key reason for this lack of evidence is that access to these offenders is difficult to acquire in the first place. Indeed, it is likely that relatively few of these offenders have ever been identified (ie only those who have been caught) and those offenders who are caught are subject to intense media scrutiny, making these individuals apprehensive about participating in any research. In addition, current evidence suggests that a relatively small proportion of these offenders are responsible for offending against a disproportionately high number of victims (eg Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012; Sullivan & Beech 2004). This again points towards the critical need for empirical research to inform prevention and safety initiatives adapted to youth-oriented institutional environments.

The main aim of this study is to investigate child sexual abuse committed by adult males in youth-oriented institutions. Offender self-report data on the victims they selected and where they offended is presented. A number of characteristics in relation to access to institutions by offenders are also examined. First, very little is known about the criminal history of these offenders and the nature and extent of their own experiences of sexual victimisation. Second, the children these offenders select to abuse, and why, has

not been thoroughly examined by any research to date. Third, another fundamental dimension absent from the literature is the examination of the actual locations where offenders take children for sexual contact. Finally, key variables related to access to youth-oriented institutions by offenders who chose this setting in order to sexually abuse children are also investigated.

Despite some of the logistical difficulties of examining sexual abuse in youth-oriented institutions, a number of scholars have investigated the characteristics of offenders in this context (for cleric offenders specifically, see for instance Haywood et al. 1996; Langevin, Curnoe & Bain 2000; Terry & Ackerman 2008). The most thorough study to date on offender characteristics in these institutions was conducted by Sullivan and Beech (2004) in the United Kingdom. Their sample was composed of religious-institutional offenders (n=27) but also teachers (n=10) and care workers (n=4). The mean age of their sample was 50 years old. At the time of assessment, offenders reported an average estimate of 15 victims. However, during treatment, the average estimated number

of reported victims increased to 48 victims. These offenders more frequently sexually abused boys (73%), but also abused girls (22%), and both boys and girls in a minority of cases (5%). Critically, a total of 37 percent of this sample had never been convicted for a sexual offence before. At their first sex offence, 27 percent were aged between 10–16 years old, 24 percent were aged between 17–21 years old and 49 percent were older than 21 years old. In addition, 51 percent of the offenders in the sample reported that they had been sexually victimised themselves during childhood.

In a follow-up study, Sullivan et al. (2011) compared institutional offenders with extrafamilial and intrafamilial offenders. They found that institutional offenders were less likely to have previous sexual or non-sexual convictions than the other two groups of offenders but were more likely to target boys and prepubescent children. They were also more likely to abuse a higher number of victims.

With a sample of 19 offenders who sexually abused within an institution in the United Kingdom, Erooga, Allnock and Telford (2012) reported that none of their sample admitted to gaining access to children

in this context for the sole purpose of obtaining sexual contact. In addition, 53 percent of offenders reported that they had no awareness of a sexual interest in children prior to their offences. These findings stand in stark contrast with those of Sullivan and Beech (2004) who found that 15 percent of their sample specifically chose their profession in order to sexually abuse children and a further 42 percent indicated that abuse was at least part of their motivation too. Another 20 percent reported that they were not sure whether sexual abuse was part of their motivation or not. In the end, only 25 percent clearly indicated that having sexual contact with children had nothing to do with their motivation for choosing their profession. The high proportion of sex offenders who admitted choosing their profession in order to sexually abuse children in Sullivan and Beech's (2004) study may be explained in part by the high number of these offenders who were in treatment at the time of the study. As noted above, Sullivan and Beech (2004) indicated that offenders in treatment reported additional aspects of their offending such as a greater number of victims.

**Table 1 Sexual victimisation experiences of offenders who were abused in childhood (n=18)<sup>a,b</sup>**

Offender/abuser/victimisation characteristics	Mean (SD)/% (Yes) (n)
Age of abuser at first sexual contact	27.39(10.73)
Abuser was male	100 (18)
Abuser knew offender	88.9 (16)
Age of offender at first sexual contact	9.61(3.68)
Abuser sexually touched offender	83.3 (15)
Abuser performed oral sex on offender	55.6 (10)
Abuser performed digital penetration on offender	44.4 (8)
Abuser performed penile penetration on offender	27.8 (5)
Offender sexually touched the abuser	44.4 (8)
Offender performed oral sex on abuser	27.8 (5)
Offender performed digital penetration on abuser	5.6 (1)
Offender performed penile penetration on abuser	5.6 (1)
Offender was sexually victimised more than one time	72.2 (13)
Offender was sexually victimised more than 5 times	50 (9)
Period of victimisation lasted more than 1 year	55.6 (10)

a: Mean and standard deviation is presented for age of abuser and age of offender

b: The term abuser is used to refer to the person who sexually abused the offender during his childhood

**Table 2 Selected characteristics of victims targeted by offenders (n=16)**

Victim characteristics	% (Yes) (n)
The child knew a lot about sex	100.0 (16)
The child had had sex before	100.0 (16)
The child had attended a class on sexuality	93.7 (15)
The child knew that s/he was not supposed to talk to strangers	75.0 (12)
The child knew not to accept a car ride from strangers	75.0 (12)
The child knew that people are not supposed to touch private parts	56.2 (9)
The child was well supervised	37.5 (6)
The child was never alone	37.5 (6)
The child was able to defend him/herself	31.2 (5)
The child was saying 'no'	31.2 (5)
The child was talking about good and bad touch	25.0 (4)
The child was talking to parents about problems	25.0 (4)
The child was telling on people	25.0 (4)
The child was violent	25.0 (4)
The child was saying that having sex was not right	18.7 (3)
The child did not want to	12.5 (2)
The child was not trusting you	12.5 (2)
The child could not be trusted	6.3 (1)

With respect to strategies adopted by these offenders to abuse children, almost no empirical studies have been completed to date. For example, Erooga, Allnock and Telford (2012) broadly indicated that 84 percent of their sample identified vulnerability in their victims such as the need of emotional support and 79 percent manipulated this vulnerability for sexual contact (see also Gallagher 1999).

Using a sample of 23 adult offenders who sexually abused children in institutions in Canada, Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben (2005) examined the strategies adopted by these offenders to gain victims' trust and cooperation and maintain victims' silence following the abuse. Strategies to gain victims' trust were primarily focused on giving love and attention to children (96%). To gain cooperation, all offenders indicated giving children attention (100%) but also emphasised non-sexual touching (96%), saying nice things about them (96%) and gradually introducing sexual touching into the relationship (83%). To maintain victims' silence following the abuse, the most frequent strategy adopted by offenders was

to tell the victims that they, the offenders, would go to jail or get in trouble if the child was to tell anyone (35%).

Interestingly, Sullivan and Beech (2004) found that 85 percent of their sample took the children away overnight at some point. A majority of these offenders (68%) reported taking the children away overnight for the specific purpose of having sexual contact with them and over three-quarters (78%) specifically arranged to meet with children outside of the institution with the specific intention of abusing them. In the study conducted by Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben (2005), 39 percent of offenders reported taking children to places outside the institutional setting to gain their trust, a strategy also identified by Erooga, Allnock and Telford (2012).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the literature on the strategies adopted by sex offenders in institutions suggests that these offenders, because of their authority status, are in a position to develop a special and intimate relationship with children during which they can gradually introduce sexual activities

and abuse. This in turn assists offenders in maintaining the abusive relationship over an extended period of time (Colton & Vanstone 1996; Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012; Leclerc, Proulx & McKibben 2005).

### The current study

Building on Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben (2005), the current study aims to provide additional information on adult offenders who committed acts of sexual abuse in youth-oriented institutions. The sample consisted of 23 adult males who had admitted committing a sexual offence against a person less than 18 years of age in an institutional context in Canada. These offenders were recruited through treatment centres in the province of Quebec and the Correctional Service of Canada in 2002. All offenders were invited to complete the Modus Operandi Questionnaire (MOQ), a self-report survey developed by Kaufman (1991). A more detailed description of the procedure and sample is described elsewhere (Leclerc, Proulx & McKibben 2005).

Among these offenders, eight had gained access to sexually abuse children through sporting activities (fencing, baseball (2), hockey (2), soccer, gymnastics, softball). An additional four were teachers, three were in the role of a foster carer (one for child protection services) and two were involved in scouts. Finally, one offender worked for a Big Brothers association, three for a youth centre, one for a newspaper delivery agency and one was a school bus driver.

## Results

### Offender characteristics, histories and experiences of sexual victimisation

The mean age of the offenders in the current study was 49.7 years (SD=8.6 years). Just over half had never been married (52.1%; n=12). An equal proportion had a university degree. With respect to sexual orientation, a total of 34.1 percent (n=8) reported being heterosexual, 39.1 percent (n=9) reported being homosexual and 26.1 percent (n=6) indicated a sexual attraction to both males and females.

In terms of self-reported offending history, these offenders reported having sexually abused a total of 492 victims (31 girls and 461 boys). The average number of victims per offender was 21.3 (SD=26.5; range=3–102). The average age of offenders at their first self-reported sexual offence was 22.5 years (median=19; SD=11.5);

only 21.7 percent (n=5) had been arrested for a sexual offence prior to being caught and convicted for the current offences. The average age of offenders at first arrest was 42 years old (SD=11.4). Only 17.4 percent (n=4) had ever been arrested before for a non-sexual offence. The average age at the first non-sexual offence was 19.8 years (SD=3.3).

Over three-quarters (78.3%; n=18) of offenders reported that they themselves had been sexually abused in childhood. In only two of these cases (11.1%; n=2) was the sexual victimisation discovered by somebody or disclosed to authorities. All of the offenders reported having never received psychological help in relation to their own sexual abuse victimisation experiences. The sexual victimisation experiences of offenders who were abused are described in detail in Table 1. In this paper, the term 'abuser' is used to refer to the person who sexually abused the offenders in the sample.

In the current sample of offenders, all reported having been abused by males and on average, reported that they were 9.6 years old (SD=3.7) when they were first abused. They reported that the average age of their abusers was 27.4 years (SD=10.7) at the time of their first victimisation experience. In the vast majority of cases (88.9%; n=16), the offender knew the abuser before the victimisation experience

occurred. The most frequent reported sexual behaviour performed by the abuser on the offenders in their childhood was fondling (83.3%; n=15). Penile penetration occurred in just over one-quarter (27.8%; n=5) of cases. The most frequent reported sexual behaviour that offenders were forced to perform on their abuser was also fondling (44.4%; n=8), while penile penetration in this context occurred only once (5.6%). Finally, nearly three-quarters (72.2%; n=13) of these offenders reported being victimised more than once in childhood by their abuser; half (50%; n=9) reported more than five incidents and similarly, 55.6 percent of respondents reported a period of victimisation that lasted for a duration of longer than one year (n=10).

### Victim selection

Data on victim selection was obtained from 16 offenders (see Table 2). Offenders were asked to generally report what victim characteristics increased their likelihood of targeting certain children over others. Responses to these items were dichotomised (yes/no). All of the offenders in the current study reported that they were likely to target child whom they knew had had sexual contact in the past and whom they perceived to know a lot about sex. Similarly, almost all of the offenders indicated they were likely to target children who they knew to have had attended a class on sexuality (93.7%; n=15).

Table 3 Location for sexual contact (n=23)

Location	% (Yes) (n)
Your own home	52.2 (12)
Go for a car ride	30.2 (7)
Isolated or out-of-the-way places	26.1 (6)
Isolated place in victim's home	21.7 (5)
Friend or relative's home	21.7 (5)
Places within institutions	21.7 (5)
Swimming pool	17.4 (4)
Bush	17.4 (4)
Take the child for a walk	13 (3)
Cinemas	8.7 (2)
Public toilets	4.3 (1)
Parks	0
Playground	0

**Table 4 Characteristics of access to youth-oriented institutions by offenders who targeted children for sexual contact (n=12)**

Institution accessed	% (Yes) (n)
Sporting club (eg hockey, baseball, soccer, gymnastics)	41.8 (5)
School (eg teacher, school bus driver)	33.3 (4)
Scout club	8.3 (1)
Big Brothers	8.3 (1)
Youth Centre	8.3 (1)
Average time spent with institution(s)	Mean (range)
Before first sexual contact	511.75 days (range=1–1,825)
Before being caught	16.2 years (range=1–47)

Interestingly, the offenders also indicated that they were quite likely to select children whom they perceived as knowing they should not talk to strangers, not accept a car ride with a stranger, or knew that people should not touch their private parts (75%, n=12 and 56.2%; n=9, respectively).

These offenders, however, reported they were less likely to select children who would protect themselves by being assertive or who acted in an assertive way such as saying ‘no’. Only one offender in the sample indicated they selected a child who they perceived could not be trusted. Offenders were also not likely to select children who they perceived to not want to have any contact with them (12.5%; n=2), not appear to trust them (12.5%; n=2), imply or say that having sex was not right (18.8%; n=3), be likely to tell their peers or other people (25%; n=4), talk to parents about their problems (25%; n=4), be violent (25%; n=4), know/talk about good and bad touching (25%; n=4), defend themselves (31.2%; n=5) and/or, say ‘no’ (31.2%; n=5) to their advances. Finally, offenders were also less likely to select children whom they perceived as never being alone or who were well supervised (37.5%; n=6).

### Location for sexual contact

As shown in Table 3, offenders reported on the use of locations for abuse. Offenders may have used a number of locations. More than half of the offenders (52.2%; n=12) used their own home for the abuse, while 20–30 percent of offenders also reported using other locations such as taking children for a drive in their car (30.2%; n=7) or using isolated places (26.1%; n=6) to abuse the child. Only five offenders (21.7%) reported

abusing their victims onsite (ie in a school (2), foster care, scout activity centre or youth centre).

### Characteristics of access to institutions by offenders

In the current study, more than half of the offenders reported having chosen to work in a youth-oriented institution for the purposes of accessing children for sexual contact (52.2%; n=12; see Table 4). On average, these offenders had spent approximately one and a half years (511.8 days) in the institution before they engaged in their first sexual offence. To provide context, offenders reported they had spent a total of 16.2 years, on average, within an institution(s) (range=1–47 years) before being caught.

### Discussion

The findings of this study are informative for scholars, practitioners and policymakers who seek to understand and prevent child sexual abuse in youth-oriented institutions.

First, on average, the offenders in this sample committed their first sex offence at a young age (22 years old). Conversely, the average age of first arrest for a sex offence was 42 years old. This 20 year gap suggests that most of these offenders were able to sexually abuse children for a long time without being apprehended. Moreover, only 17.4 percent had a prior record for a non-sexual offence and a similarly small proportion (21.7%) had a prior record for a sex offence. This figure is substantially lower than the one reported in the study of Sullivan and Beech (2004) (63%). Thus, while these findings suggest

that criminal history screening of potential employees in youth-oriented institutions might have detected several of these offenders, in some cases, offenders had no prior record for a sex offence and would not have been discovered through a criminal history check. While it seems obvious that screening the sexual offending history of potential employees should be completed systematically in youth-oriented institutions, the findings here potentially suggest that relying entirely on this process to prevent potential offenders from accessing these institutions will not identify many of those responsible for perpetrating acts of sexual abuse (eg Cleary 2012; Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012; Trocme & Schumaker 1999).

Second, most of the sex offenders in the current study reported being sexually abused themselves during childhood (78.3%). The self-reported experiences of sexual victimisation occurred at a young age, often involved intrusive sexual behaviours and lasted for more than one year for over half of these offenders. The proportion of sexually victimised offenders in this study may represent one of the highest reported in the literature on sex offenders in general and among samples of institutional offenders (eg Cale, Leclerc & Smallbone 2014; Hanson & Slater 1988). For example, in the study by Sullivan and Beech (2004), there were no statistically significant differences in terms of the sexual victimisation histories between their sample of offenders who abused in a youth-oriented institution (51%) and another sample of sex offenders who did not abuse in this particular setting (60%). One explanation for the higher prevalence of self-reported victimisation experiences



in the current study may simply have to do with the relatively small sample size and the extent to which these individuals are representative of offenders in the institutional context. At the same time, the context of the study may also lead to offenders exaggerating their own victimisation experiences to interviewers.

Third, offenders reported that they were most likely to select children whom they perceived as having sexual knowledge or prior sexual experiences. One possible explanation for this is the fact that sex offenders who target children are often characterised by cognitive distortions, where they misperceive children as tempting and/or trying to attract them (eg Abel, Becker & Cunningham-Rathner 1984). At the same time, it is becoming better established that there is much heterogeneity in the development and expression of sexual behaviors of children prior to adolescence (DeLamater & Friedrich 2002). Therefore, while some child sex offenders may be characterised to some extent by cognitive distortions, the findings seem to indicate that some pay close attention to this particular aspect of behavioural development in their victims. Another possibility is that offenders somehow identify whom they perceive to be sexually active children or prior sexual abuse victims. Although it is not entirely clear how they may do this, Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne (1995) indicated some of the most prevalent criteria for victim selection among child sex abusers they interviewed included perceived physical attractiveness, how the victim was dressed, child's lack of confidence and forming/having a special relationship with the child. In other words, offenders may select victims they perceive as easier to coerce and intimidate or blackmail into maintaining secrecy, which is consistent with Erooga, Allnock and Telford's (2012) concept of emotional vulnerability.

It was also found that 75 percent of offenders were still likely to select children who 'knew' that they should not talk to strangers or accept car rides with a stranger. Finkelhor and colleagues (1995a, 1995b) found that even though children seemed to gain prevention knowledge about sexual abuse through personal

safety programs, the positive impact of these programs on reducing victimisation is unclear at best. On the one hand, these children tended to report sex abuse incidents more often than others. Gibson and Leitenberg (2000) reported that eight percent of a sample of female undergraduates who were exposed to these programs experienced sexual abuse compared with 14 percent who had never participated in such programs. Conversely, the positive outcomes these programs have in certain contexts are likely not applicable given the nature of the relationship between offenders and victims in the context of youth-oriented institutions. These offenders manipulate their victims into an intimate relationship and importantly, often have authority over them (Colton & Vanstone 1996; Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012; Leclerc, Proulx & McKibben 2005). Therefore, this raises the possibility that many children will 'let down their guard' or simply do what these offenders ask them, regardless of what they learned through personal safety programs.

Further, while offenders reported that they were less likely to select assertive children for abuse, assertiveness was not necessarily a guarantee that children would not be targeted for sexual abuse. In fact, Leclerc, Wortley and Smallbone (2011) found that the most effective strategies (eg telling the offender they do not want to) were sometimes ineffective in preventing sexual victimisation incidents. Leclerc, Wortley and Smallbone (2010) further indicated that all forms of strategies were positively associated with the use of violence by the offender, which suggests that there is still risk in using self-protection strategies for children (see also Finkelhor, Asdigian & Dziuba-Leatherman 1995a). In any event, resilience building may be a reasonable approach to increase the capacity of children to protect themselves in a context where they otherwise may not normally do so. Resilience building is covered to some extent in many programs (see MacIntyre & Carr 2000) and has been suggested by a number of scholars in the field (eg Smallbone, Marshall & Wortley 2008).

It was also observed that several of these offenders took children to their own home for sexual contact. Many offenders also used another home (victim, friend or relative's home), isolated places, their car, a swimming pool or a bush, for example. Only five offenders sexually abused their victim(s) onsite at the institution. This finding suggests that most offenders try to avoid the risk of being detected by taking children away from the institutional setting (see also Sullivan & Beech 2004). Most importantly, this finding suggests that the physical setting of some institutions may have little to do with the majority of sexual abuse incidents—at least in relation to the perpetration of the offence itself. This may have been influenced by the fact that a majority of institutions offenders worked at did not have children staying onsite on a regular basis; therefore, opportunities for offending onsite were limited. In any event, and consistent with other studies (Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012; Sullivan & Beech 2004), a focal point for prevention should be restricting situations where employees could take children offsite. This could be achieved through rules and policies that regulate interactions between employees and children in the different contexts where employees find themselves alone with a child or a group of children (eg for activities or overnight trips). Overnight trips could require the presence of a minimum of two employees (and/or involve parents) to facilitate supervision (Leclerc, Proulx & McKibben 2005). Parents could be required to pick up their children after work (or ask another parent to do so) to avoid employees having to drive children home without supervision. A complementary avenue for institutions could be to involve employees in the design of rules and policies (Bringer, Brackenridge & Johnston 2002) that regulate interactions between them and children onsite but also offsite. A consensus that would prohibit any interaction between employees and children offsite without the supervision of parents could be reached and thus may encourage employees to pay particular attention to this issue.

Finally, several of the offenders reported deliberately choosing to work with a youth-

oriented institution for the purposes of accessing children for sexual contact. Despite this intent, it still took offenders an average of one and a half years before sexually abusing a child for the first time. Once there, they were with the institution(s) for an average of 16 years before being arrested.

Given the time period between joining an institution and offenders starting to abuse, and the time they were arrested, there may be a number of opportunities to intervene to prevent abuse as discussed above. The findings indicate that offenders, once they were hired/recruited, had the opportunity to abuse children for years and continued to do so (see also Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012).

Conversely, several offenders also reported that they did not select an institution specifically for the purpose of committing abuse and other studies have also shown that several of these offenders did not necessarily select an institution for the explicit purpose of creating opportunities for sexual contact with children (Erooga, Allnock & Telford 2012; Sullivan & Beech 2004). While this may, to some extent, reflect a response bias (ie offenders may lie about their motivations or intentions), it also possibly suggests that some offenders may not have a clear intention to perpetrate abuse and may simply take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves over time and/or as their personal situation changes (eg life stressors, employment, relationship or family problems; Cortoni & Marshall 2001).

Again, to prevent potential employees from developing intentions of offending, it is possible that opportunities to offend could be reduced by better regulating interactions between children and employees. Supervision could also be increased onsite after working hours when children are asked to stay longer while most employees leave the institution (eg school).

There were some methodological limitations to the study. Most importantly, it was based on offender self-report data, which means that some findings may be biased by offenders' cognitive distortions and the setting of the interviews. For instance, it is

possible that some offenders reported that they were sexually abused during childhood or that they selected children who knew about sex to diminish their accountability.

It is important to note that the offences described in the current study were based on retrospective self-report data collected in 2002 from offenders who worked in Canadian institutions. Therefore, the generalisability of the findings and potential policy implications should be interpreted with this in mind. For example, it might be important to consider whether and to what extent institutional changes may have occurred in Canada over the timeframe of the offences considered in the current study context. At the same time, however, current research suggests that youth-oriented institution environments, whether in United Kingdom, Canada, United States or Australia (where much research is conducted), are dealing with very similar issues in terms of offending patterns (eg similar offender modus operandi and opportunity structure). In addition, the paucity of the research on such a critical problem warrants the need for further empirical evidence.

The dimensions of this phenomenon that were previously investigated (eg the offender's access to institutions) were intentionally examined but so also were others that have received less or no attention in research (eg victim selection and locations for sexual contact). This strategy was chosen with the aim to boost what is already known to stimulate thinking on a range of additional potential directions for understanding and preventing this phenomenon.

Examining offending patterns of these offenders is essential because it addresses what happens during these incidents, which can have major implications in terms of the strategies that can then be adopted to respond to this problem and provide children with safer environments (eg Erooga 2012; Kaufman et al. 2012; Leclerc, Proulx & McKibben 2005).

However, very little is known about patterns that have immediate implications

for understanding the situations in which these offenders commit their offences. For instance, future research should investigate the circumstances under which offenders find time alone with their victims and the type of activities they engage in with them immediately prior to the offence. Routine activities preceding child sexual abuse are critical in this context, where the objective is to prevent child sexual abuse from occurring in the first place.

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