



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

ISSN 0817-8542

No. 554 July 2018

Abstract | Offender and offence characteristics associated with the onset of child sexual abuse in adolescence and adulthood were examined in a sample of males adjudicated for sexual offences. Predictors of adolescent- and adult-onset abuse reinforce that adolescents and adults, for the most part, are two distinct offender populations who may be motivated to sexually abuse for different reasons and who are influenced by opportunity structures, constraints and experiences that characterise these developmental stages. Findings support tailored prevention efforts for adolescents and adults. Emphasis should be placed on primary and secondary prevention efforts that are currently less developed in Australia, compared to tertiary responses.

Understanding and preventing the onset of child sexual abuse in adolescence and adulthood

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Given the known short- and long-term harms associated with the sexual abuse of children (Paolucci, Genuis & Violato 2010), effective responses to this issue are at the forefront of the prevention agenda. The substantial social and economic costs associated with child sexual abuse has necessitated a focus on reducing sexual recidivism among known offenders and developing effective responses for victims. Although these tertiary responses are important and necessary, preventing these incidents from occurring in the first place is the ultimate goal. Investigations into key factors associated with the onset of sexual abuse can inform theoretical developments and advance primary and secondary prevention efforts, alongside tertiary responses, to truly reduce the extent and impacts of these crimes.



CRIMINOLOGY
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Unlike general crimes, research indicates a bimodal pattern for the onset of child sex offending—adolescence and middle adulthood (Hanson 2002). According to Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin (2009), for example, adolescents (<18 years of age) account for approximately one-quarter (26%) of all sex offenders, and 36 percent of those who perpetrate child sex offences. During 2016–17 in Queensland (where this study was conducted) adolescents accounted for 22 percent of all sexual offences reported to police (Queensland Police Service 2017). Nationwide there has been a 35 percent increase in sexual assaults (particularly non-assaultive sexual offences) committed by adolescents since 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017).

It is now well accepted within the field that, although some adolescents will persist with sexual offending into adulthood, for most this behaviour is limited to adolescence (Caldwell 2010; McCann & Lussier 2008). This is supported by prospective (Lussier & Blokland 2013) and retrospective (Marshall, Barbaree & Eccles 1991; McKillop et al. 2015a, 2012; Smallbone & Wortley 2004) studies that suggest only a minority of adult child-sex offenders begin sexual offending in adolescence. It seems, for the most part, adolescents and adults comprise two distinct groups with potentially unique explanatory factors for the onset of their offending. In this regard, and for some time now, concerns have been voiced about the appropriateness of traditional criminal justice policies and interventions directed towards adolescents, particularly their reliance on adult aetiology and patterns of offending without regard for possible developmental (including neurological, cognitive and maturational) differences or the contextual constraints and opportunities that comprise adolescents' and adults' lives (Chaffin 2008; Chaffin, Letourneau & Silovsky 2002).

Further to this, responses have been historically grounded in clinical and psychiatric explanations which rely heavily on assumptions that sexual deviance sets these individuals apart from the majority (Smallbone 2006). These have often been explained by developmental adversities (eg family violence, disrupted attachment relationships, and unstable home environments) that shape individual behaviour (Dennison & Leclerc 2011; Lussier et al. 2015). These factors are important for understanding individual-level vulnerabilities that may contribute to the development of sexual offending behaviour. However, this dispositional focus does not explain why some perpetrators begin sexual offending in adolescence while others seemingly navigate successfully through adolescence refraining from sexual offending until adulthood.

One way forward is to conceptualise sexually abusive behaviour, like all human behaviour, in terms of the person–situation interaction (Mischel 1968). Offending behaviour cannot be understood in isolation from the ecological and situational context in which it occurs. It is these contextual factors that best explain opportunities to offend, and why behaviours manifest at specific places and at particular times. Perpetrators and victims are embedded within a social ecology spanning family, peer, neighbourhood and community systems. Factors within these systems influence an individual's behaviour and may either act as risk factors for the development of offending, or provide some protection from an offending pathway.

Within these social ecologies, situational factors have the most direct and powerful influence over behaviour. Emerging findings strongly suggest that contextual factors in the situations immediately preceding child sexual abuse provide both the opportunity and impetus to offend (eg McKillop et al. 2015b, 2012; Wortley & Smallbone 2006). Situations may actively trigger offending motivations

that may not otherwise have developed at that time and place (Wortley 2008; Wortley & Smallbone 2006). For adults, the combination of proximal stressors (eg marital, living conditions, financial stressors) with other personal vulnerabilities, such as attachment insecurity, intimacy deficits, and emotional regulation problems that developed in childhood might increase the risk of engaging in sexually abusive behaviour (eg McKillop et al. 2012). For adolescents, it has been proposed that sexual offending behaviour may be an extension of existing antisocial tendencies coincident with the onset of ordinary sexual curiosity and experimentation (Caldwell 2002), as well as difficulties with social relationships (see Grant et al. 2009).

It is possible that adolescent and adult life stages offer contextual similarities conducive to the enactment of sexually abusive behaviour during these times. For example, changes in routines (eg becoming a parent or step-parent, paid and unpaid employment) increase exposure to children and therefore opportunities to engage in sexually abusive behaviour during everyday interactions with children (Hanson 2002). There may also be contextual constraints that limit sexual offending in adolescence that are absent in adulthood by virtue of age, trust, status and responsibility. Certainly, the limited research directly comparing adolescent and adult sexual offending behaviour indicates some important distinctions in this regard (Finkelhor, Ormrod & Chaffin 2009; Kaufman et al. 1996; Lussier et al. 2015; Miranda & Corcoran 2000).

Despite current efforts in Australia (eg Flanagan 2003; O'Brien 2008) and worldwide (eg Borduin, Schaeffer & Heiblum 2009) to differentiate prevention and intervention approaches for adolescents and adults who sexually harm, there is a lack of research directly comparing adolescents and adults, and their offending, to inform policy and practice at a national and international level. Discerning the commonalities and differences between adolescent- and adult-onset sexual abuse behaviour provides opportunities to validate or challenge the way this issue is currently conceptualised and responded to so that criminal justice policies, therapeutic interventions and prevention initiatives are developmentally appropriate and thus effective.

Research aims and questions

The current study builds on two previous government-funded projects (Smallbone et al. 2005; Smallbone, Leclerc & Allard 2011) that highlighted important gaps in knowledge concerning the similarities and differences in the circumstances of adolescent- and adult-onset sexual abuse of children. The present study aimed to compare individual, ecological and situational factors that contribute to the onset of sexual abuse in adolescence and adulthood. Specifically, this study sought to identify:

- common (ie to both adolescent-onset and adult-onset offenders) and unique developmental risk factors associated with the onset of sexual abuse;
- situational elements and contextual factors associated with the onset of child sexual abuse during these two life stages; and
- whether such factors have a unique or interactive relationship with the onset of child sexual abuse in adolescence and adulthood.

There were three key research questions:

- Is it possible to distinguish adolescent-onset from adult-onset child sexual abuse offences based on individual (developmental) factors?
- In what circumstances and contexts do child sexual abuse incidents first occur in adolescence and adulthood?
- Do certain individual and contextual factors predict adolescent-onset and adult-onset child sexual abuse offences?

Method

Participants

Two separate samples were integrated for this study. The first sample included 104 convicted adult male child-sex offenders who participated in the Smallbone et al. (2005) study. Additional participant data (n=62) were collected between 2014 and 2016 to increase this adult sample to 166 participants. The adolescent sample was drawn from a larger cohort of clients referred by a court between 2000 and 2013 to a specialist forensic and clinical program for adolescents who commit sexual offences (Smallbone, Leclerc & Allard 2011). Only those adolescents who had committed their first sexual offence against a child aged under 16 years (n=193) were included in the present study. Sample characteristics are described in Table 1.

Classification of onset type

Adolescent-onset offenders were classified as individuals who committed their first known sexual offence between the ages of 10 and 17. All other offenders were classified as adult-onset offenders. Twenty-two participants from the adult cohort (13.3%) reported that they had committed their first child-sex offence in adolescence and were classified as 'adolescent-onset' for the purposes of this study. As shown in Table 1, the final sample size for the adult-onset group was 144 participants (40.1% of total sample). The adolescent-onset group included 215 participants.

Table 1: Sample characteristics		
Participant group		
	Adolescent (n=193)	Adult (n=166)
Offender age at time of study		
Mean (SD)	15.7 yrs (1.4)	46.0 yrs (12.0)
Range	12–19 yrs	20–84 yrs
Heritage		
Non-Indigenous Australian	65.6%	84.6%
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples	30.2%	10.5%
Other	4.2%	4.9%
Highest level of education		
University/TAFE/Apprenticeship	0.0%	24.9%
Secondary school	7.3%	10.3%
Some secondary school	86.0%	52.7%
Primary school	6.7%	11.5%
No formal schooling	0.0%	0.6%
Residence		
Custodial	8.8%	95.2%
Community	91.2%	4.8%
Onset type		
	Adolescent (n=215)	Adult (n=144)
Age at onset sexual offence		
Mean (SD)	13.9 yrs (1.5)	34.1 yrs (12.3)
Range	10–17 yrs	18–79 yrs
Victim characteristics		
Mean age (SD)	8.6 yrs (3.5)	10.8 yrs (3.4)
Range of ages	1–15 yrs	1–15 yrs
Female	73.4%	75.7%

Source: Smallbone et al. 2005; Smallbone et al. 2011; AIC CRG collection 2016 [computer file]

Measures

Data from the two previous projects (Smallbone et al. 2005; Smallbone, Leclerc & Allard 2011) included detailed official and self-report information on developmental pathways, sexual offence situations and offending trajectories. A range of individual, ecological and situational factors associated with onset were considered. Moderate to high inter-coder and test-retest reliability were found for these measures (McKillop et al. 2018).

Procedure

Comparable data from the existing adult and adolescent databases were integrated. Separate permissions to use these de-identified data were obtained at the time of each research study. Participants for the new adult cohort were identified by Queensland Corrections staff and subsequently interviewed by the research team. Participation was confidential and voluntary. Chi-square analyses and independent samples t-tests were conducted to directly compare the two groups on developmental, ecological and situational factors associated with the onset offence. Binomial logistic regression (using temporal block-entry method) was subsequently conducted to examine predictors of adolescent- and adult-onset sexual abuse.

Results

Is it possible to distinguish adolescent-onset from adult-onset child sexual abuse offences based on individual (developmental) factors?

Two key findings emerged from this analysis, as indicated in Table 2.

Key finding 1: Adverse developmental histories are common among adolescents and adults who sexually abuse children

Both groups shared developmental backgrounds marred by child maltreatment, although the type of abuse experienced differed. A larger proportion of the adolescent-onset group reported experiences of non-sexual abuse, while a larger proportion of the adult-onset group reported sexual abuse. Problems appeared more pronounced in the adolescent-onset group, with a greater proportion reporting child protection histories resulting in placement in out-of-home care. These findings reiterate previous propositions (Lussier et al. 2015) that adverse developmental experiences are common in the backgrounds of offenders and may produce individual-level vulnerabilities that increase the risk of engagement in antisocial (including sexually abusive) behaviour across the life course.

Key finding 2: Sexual offending in adolescence is often preceded by a history of contact with the youth justice system for non-sexual offences

Consistent with previous studies (eg Knight, Ronis & Zakireh 2009; Lussier et al. 2015), a history of contact with the youth justice system for non-sexual offences featured more prominently in the adolescent-onset group. This fits with theorising that sexually abusive behaviour at this stage of development may coincide with the onset of puberty and the salience of sexual feelings and curiosity at this peak risk period, particularly for those males who already have a broader involvement in antisocial and illegal activities. Such activities are characterised by coercion, deception, rule-breaking and exploitation of others, all of which are also characteristic of sexual abuse (Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh & Smith 2013). This may be more reflective of the motivations for the onset of sexually abusive behaviour in adolescence than previous conceptions focused on sexual deviance or deep-seated propensities for sexual offending (Smallbone 2006).

In turn, these findings raise questions as to whether the lack of youth justice history of some might help explain delayed-onset pathways for sexual abuse. As Lussier and colleagues (2015) theorise, delayed sexual abuse onset until adulthood might be associated with less exposure to antisocial peers and behaviour during adolescence than their adolescent counterparts—that is, adult-onset offenders may have had fewer opportunities to offend at an earlier stage. More investigation into protective factors associated with delayed onset is required to answer these questions.

Table 2: Individual (developmental) factors

	Onset type			χ^2	Test <i>p</i> -value (ϕ)
	Adolescent (n=215)	Adult (n=144)	Total (N=359)		
Child maltreatment	72.1%	71.6%	71.5%	0.03	0.86
Non-sexual abuse only	33.3%	19.1%	27.5%	7.67	0.006 (–0.16)
Sexual abuse only	7.5%	19.9%	12.3%	11.11	0.001 (0.19)
Sexual & non-sexual	31.3%	32.6%	31.9%	0.02	0.90
Child protection history					
Out-of-home placement	31.3%	19.7%	26.6%	5.23	0.02 (–0.13)
Youth justice history	75.1%	41.3%	60.9%	38.51	<0.001 (–0.34)

Note: Values were missing (6–19 depending on cell); non-sexual abuse included physical and emotional abuse and neglect
Source: Smallbone et al. 2005; Smallbone et al. 2011; AIC CRG collection 2016 [computer file]

In what circumstances and contexts do child sexual abuse incidents first occur in adolescence and adulthood?

One key finding emerged from these analyses. The results of this part of the investigation are presented in Table 3.

Key finding 3: Offending is differentially influenced by situational factors within the routine activities and social ecologies that comprise these two developmental stages

The findings highlight the proximal influences on behaviour found within the social ecologies and immediate situations preceding onset. In terms of commonalities, both adolescents and adults tended to first sexually abuse someone well known to them and with whom an established relationship existed. Females were the main victims of abuse, although adolescent offenders tended to abuse non-familial children, and adults familial children. This is consistent with the types of relationships and interactions with children that characterise these two stages of development. In adolescence, independence from family is a dominant factor. More time is spent engaging with peers, in and outside the home environment, and supervision may be relaxed somewhat. At the peak risk period for adults, it is more likely they will have access to children within their immediate or extended family and those of their friends.

In line with previous findings (eg McKillop et al. 2015b; Smallbone & Wortley 2004) offending within the domestic setting was a common feature for both groups. Private spaces such as bedrooms, where time is shared engaging in routine activities (eg playing games, getting ready for bed) seem to present risks conducive to sexual abuse. The finding that many offenders formed their intention to abuse during the encounter with the victim suggests that these routine interactions can dynamically influence motivation and behaviours (Wortley 2008).

Compliance strategies used to engage the child in sexual contact and maintain their silence also differed between the two groups, as did the child victim's resistance strategies. More adolescents relied on strategies involving coercion or force compared to adults. Likewise, child victims were more likely to use overt resistance strategies with adolescents. These behaviours were more evident when the adolescent offender and victim were closer in age ($M=4.72$, $SD=3.41$ for coercive; $M=5.90$, $SD=3.22$ for non-coercive), $t(203)=2.52$, $p=0.01$, $d=0.35$. As the age gap increased, strategies tended to mimic those often observed in abusive adult-child relationships (eg emotional manipulation, bribes, initiating through play). Child victims were also less likely to overtly resist the offender as the age gap increased ($M=4.22$, $SD=2.90$ for overt resistance; $M=6.19$, $SD=3.42$ for covert resistance), $t(193)=4.17$, $p<0.01$, $d=0.62$. This highlights the inherent authority older adolescents and adults have in these relationships. As such, common messages encouraging children to 'speak up' in protective behaviours programs should be made with caution, as this may not be realistic for many children.

The findings also point to the situational constraints of adolescence. A higher proportion of incidents by adolescent offenders occurred when others were close by and most times this was an adult. These incidents were also more likely to have been witnessed. Adolescents have less authority and control over domestic spaces. They are more likely to be around children under circumstances of adult supervision compared to adults, who may have sole caregiving roles or have access to children unsupervised for longer periods of time.

More adult witnesses intervened with adolescents than with adults. Adults may be more confident to question and intervene when they witness something suspicious with adolescents, than with adults. This tends to be a natural inclination in everyday life, but is also likely to be a consequence of adults' ability to conceal their intentions, or provide plausible explanations for suspicious behaviour, compared to adolescents. Children were least likely to successfully intervene, reinforcing the point that children should not be expected to take on responsibility for preventing abuse.

The longer duration and higher frequency of abuse by adults may be explained by the transient nature of adolescent sexual behaviour, the fact that many incidents were witnessed or that adults are more likely to have frequent unsupervised access to victims. For adult-onset offenders, maintaining a sexual relationship with the child may also be a persistent maladaptive care-seeking response to the need for attachment, especially in times of distress (McKillop et al. 2012).

Table 3: Offence onset characteristics (ecological and situational factors)					
	Onset type			Test	
	Adolescent (n=215)	Adult (n=144)	Total (N=359)	χ^2	p-value (ϕ)
	%	%	%		
<i>Prior to onset</i>					
Situational precipitators					
Lonely	5.2	36.2	17.6	54.02	<0.001 (0.40)
Depressed	2.4	30.5	13.6	54.70	<0.001 (0.40)
Sexually aroused	52.1	16.3	37.9	44.71	<0.001 (-0.36)
Intoxicated	9.9	17.7	13.0	16.68	<0.001 (0.23)
Intention to abuse					
Formed during encounter	66.4	75.2	69.9		
Formed while knew, before onset ^a	31.3	19.9	26.8	6.85	0.03 (0.14)
Formed before met victim	2.3	5.0	3.4		
<i>During onset incident</i>					
Relationship context^b					
Familial ^a	43.5	54.6	47.9		
Non-familial ^a	51.4	36.9	45.6	7.63	0.02 (0.15)
Stranger	5.1	8.5	6.5		
Offence setting					
Domestic	79.4	84.4	81.4		
Organisational	6.1	2.1	4.5	3.26	0.20
Public	14.5	13.5	14.1		
Interactions at time of onset					
Watching television with child	11.9	17.7	14.2	1.90	0.17
In bed with child	1.9	13.5	6.6	16.60	<0.001 (0.23)
Playing a game	29.0	12.1	22.2	13.12	<0.001 (-0.20)
Not doing anything with child	31.4	28.4	30.2	0.24	0.62
Compliance strategies					
Force	46.1	2.8	28.4	77.42	<0.001 (-0.47)
Victim reaction					
Overt resistance	39.8	8.5	26.7	39.42	<0.001 (-0.35)
Sexual behaviours					
Penetrative	55.0	37.0	47.9	10.15	0.001(-0.18)
Presence of others					
Adult guardian	76.9	60.2	71.5	21.46	<0.001(-0.25)
Child guardian	23.1	39.8	28.5		

<i>Following onset incident</i>					
Offence witnessed	31.1	7.9	21.9		
Adult	32.3	55.6	35.1	25.09	<0.001(-0.27)
Child	67.7	44.4	64.6		
Strategies to secure silence					
Nothing (spur of moment)	81.6	83.1	82.2		
Force/threats/coercion	7.3	0.7	4.4	17.62	0.001 (0.24)
Emotional manipulation/bribes	5.6	14.7	9.5		
Verbal/gestured not to tell	5.6	1.5	3.8		
Frequency of contact					
Once ^a	52.5	28.7	42.9		
2–10 times	39.7	40.4	40.0	35.71	<0.001(0.32)
11–50 times ^a	5.7	23.5	12.8		
More than 50 times ^a	2.4	7.4	4.3		
Duration of contact					
One day ^a	53.1	29.4	43.8		
Between 1 day and 1 month	16.6	10.3	14.1	34.47	<0.001(0.32)
Between 1 and 6 months	12.8	16.2	14.1		
More than 6 months ^a	17.5	44.1	28.0		

a: Adjusted residuals $\geq +/ -2.0$

b: Familial=biological child or stepchild, sibling, niece/nephew, grandchild, cousin. Non-familial=child of friend, neighbour, child met through workplace.

Stranger=a child known for less than 24 hours

Note: Values were missing (4–22 depending on cell)

Source: Smallbone et al. 2005; Smallbone et al. 2011; AIC CRG collection 2016 [computer file]

Do certain individual and contextual characteristics predict adolescent-onset and adult-onset child-sex abuse offences?

This part of the investigation focused on predictors of onset. Variables that preceded onset and found to be significant at earlier stages of the investigation were included in the analysis. Table 4 presents the results of the logistic regression. One key finding emerged from this analysis.

Key finding 4: Adolescents and adults may be motivated to sexually abuse children for different reasons

Adolescent-onset offending was predicted by a history of contact with the youth justice system for non-sexual offences and sexual motivations. Negative mood states (eg depression and loneliness) and intoxication were predictors of adult-onset. The findings suggest that these two groups may often have fundamentally different reasons and motivations for engaging in the sexual abuse of children.

For adolescents this may be a spillover of other already established antisocial and violating behaviours into the sexual domain, at a stage where sexual exploration, curiosity and activity is pronounced. For adults their behaviour may reflect difficulty coping with significant negative life changes or events associated with this developmental stage, including problems in intimate partner relationships (Lussier & Blokland 2013). One possible explanation already espoused in the adult

literature (Burk & Burkhart 2003; McKillop et al. 2012) is that adult-onset offending is associated with attachment-related insecurities that interact with situational stressors leading to diathesis of stress and, in turn, sexually abusive behaviour. The combination of emotional vulnerability and the disinhibiting effects of intoxication may have led to the onset of sexual abuse for some of these adults as a maladaptive coping strategy.

Table 4: Predictors of adolescent- versus adult-onset sexual abuse

Model and predictor	B	SE	Wald	p-value	Odds ratio	95% CI for OR	
						Lower	Upper
Block 1: Individual factors							
Youth justice history	1.36	0.27	26.20	<0.001	3.88	2.31	6.52
Sexual abuse	-0.93	0.39	5.77	0.011	0.40	0.19	0.84
Non-sexual abuse	0.56	0.29	3.82	ns	1.76	0.99	3.10
Out-of-home placement	0.23	0.30	0.58	ns	1.26	0.70	2.28
Block 2: Individual and contextual factors							
Youth justice history	1.94	0.36	28.84	<0.001	6.94	3.42	14.07
Sexual abuse	-0.45	0.48	0.85	ns	0.64	0.25	1.65
Non-sexual abuse	0.48	0.37	1.66	ns	1.62	0.78	3.37
Out-of-home placement	0.04	0.39	0.01	ns	1.04	0.49	2.22
Prior intent	0.58	0.40	2.05	ns	1.78	0.81	3.90
Sexual motivation	1.95	0.38	27.04	<0.001	7.05	3.38	4.73
Lonely	-1.76	0.45	15.19	<0.001	0.17	0.07	0.42
Depressed	-2.34	0.60	15.34	<0.001	0.10	0.03	0.31
Intoxicated	-1.63	0.40	16.40	<0.001	0.20	0.09	0.43

Note: Group membership (0=adulthood, 1=adolescence); all dichotomous variables coded (0=no, 1=yes); $\chi^2(9, N=325)=174.53, p<0.001$ (Nagelkerke $R^2=0.56$); correct classification=81.5% (81.4% adolescent-onset & 81.8% for adult-onset); AUC=0.89, $p<0.001$ (95% CI: 0.85–92)
Source: Smallbone et al. 2005; Smallbone et al. 2011; AIC CRG collection 2016 [computer file]

Discussion

The four key findings from this research map three important areas of focus for policy and practice relevant to a range of community and government agencies.

Recommendation 1: Investment in prevention and early intervention should be a key priority for policy development in Australia

In line with findings 1, 2 and 4, there are currently missed opportunities for early intervention with adolescents and adults. For adolescents, assessment and treatment of individuals in contact with the youth justice system should be broadened to address non-sexual pathways to sexual offending as a secondary prevention approach. Existing youth justice programs may benefit from incorporating psycho-education sessions on safe sexual relationships and consent to raise awareness of the risks and circumstances surrounding sexual behaviour at this age. It is acknowledged that great sensitivity surrounds these issues and that most adolescents who engage in non-sexual offences will not go

on to perpetrate sexual offences. However, adolescents coming into contact with the youth justice system are all navigating through puberty, when sexual interests, relationships and activity are salient. The inclusion of these components in youth justice programs may be a logical, productive and pre-emptive measure in this regard. It could also extend to other community-based services working with at-risk youth.

As per key finding 3, the fact that most offenders knew their victim and some had had thoughts about having sexual contact with them before engaging in abuse indicates possible opportunities for both (potential) offenders or concerned others to seek help before or during the early stages of sexual abuse. Stop It Now! (USA; UK) is one secondary prevention initiative at the forefront of sexual abuse prevention overseas. This anonymous, confidential helpline assists people concerned about their thoughts and/or behaviour or those of others (Denis & Whitehead 2012).

Evaluations of Stop It Now! (UK) show promise in both the uptake of service-seekers and positive outcomes resulting from intervention. For instance, Stop It Now! (UK) received over 30,000 calls in their first 10 years of operation, 38 percent of whom were adults concerned about their own thoughts and behaviour; six percent were parents or carers concerned about a young person's sexual behaviour (particularly males between 11 and 15 years; Denis & Whitehead 2012). There is potential for programs like this to target adolescents as well as adults. The alternative would be to integrate this support into existing youth helplines (eg Kids Helpline) by training relevant staff in responding to these issues. Services like this are lacking in Australia and should be a key area for policy development as a new initiative in the prevention of sexual abuse in Australia.

Also in line with finding 3, at a more general level, education for children, parents, teachers and health providers on indicators, dynamics and dimensions of sexual abuse, risky situations and contexts can instil resilience, enhance capacities for capable guardianship and encourage early disclosure. For adolescents, school-based programs that address issues of consent, sexual ethics, coercion and misperceptions of sexual behaviour should be considered as a primary prevention initiative. The finding that emotional manipulation and use of trust in relationships as a powerful compliance tool is particularly important for informing policy around education programs to create awareness that sexual abuse can be preceded by perceived prosocial behaviours that are subtle and manipulative. Importantly, promoting open communication within families and other support networks within the child's social ecology (eg school and peers) is a universal prevention tool that everyone can use.

Recommendation 2: Policy development and implementation should consider ecological and situational factors as a contextualised approach to explaining, and responding to, child sexual abuse

Consistent with all four key findings, a comprehensive approach to understanding and preventing sexual abuse must explicitly consider the ecological and situational influences and how these interact with individual-level vulnerabilities, to produce sexually abusive behaviours at particular times and places. Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh and Smith (2013) have previously cautioned against clinical assessment and observations that 'artificially frame the problem in terms of the individual offender alone' (p 49).

Many adolescent programs now recognise the developmental context of adolescence (Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh & Smith 2013). Multi-systemic approaches focus on the multiple determinants of sexually abusive behaviour in the context of adolescents' natural social ecology (eg peers, family and school). Evaluations of these approaches indicate promising outcomes for adolescents (Borduin, Schaeffer & Heiblum 2009; KPMG 2014). However, adult treatment programs still tend to focus heavily on dispositional features (eg deviant sexual interests/preoccupations, cognitive distortions) of offenders (Bumby 2006). Recognising ecological and situational factors shifts the focus to the risks posed within the immediate offence setting to complement and extend existing offender-focused interventions.

It might be worthwhile considering whether systemic models like those implemented with adolescents could be useful for adults, who are also embedded in, and shaped by, their own social ecosystem. A promising re-entry program for adult child-sex offenders is Circles of Support and Accountability (Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie 2009). This program focuses on fostering connection and support within the context of the offender's environment upon release from prison, to assist them in their integration. Positive outcomes from these programs (Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie 2009) have been attributed to these increased supports. This may lessen feelings of social disconnection that can lead to negative emotional states which might trigger reoffending in some men. This program has recently been introduced into Australia and outcome evaluations will help to determine the short- and long-term effectiveness of these interventions.

Regardless of offending motivations, results showed both groups tended to victimise people they knew, and with whom they had an established and trusting relationship, in places familiar to them. The findings emphasise the role that situational factors play in the onset of sexual offending. Modifying situational and environmental factors to reduce opportunities for child sexual abuse should be considered as part of a comprehensive prevention plan. Opportunities to intervene successfully may be greater in the adolescent group, who, because of their developmental status, tend to be less sophisticated in their offending behaviour and who live in a world characterised by greater scrutiny and supervision than adults where witnesses are more likely to intervene.

Recommendation 3: Effective intervention requires developmentally tailored approaches that address the criminogenic risks and needs unique to these two developmental stages

Overall, the present findings highlight some differences in offence pathways for adolescents and adults who sexually harm, and suggest that they may in fact engage in this behaviour for fundamentally different reasons. This research therefore provides another platform from which to approach the task of extending current policies and interventions that attend to some of the distinct risk factors associated with the onset of sexual offending at these two life stages.

Limitations

There are always concerns raised about the accuracy of self-report and retrospective data, particularly in offender samples (Payne & Piquero 2016). Despite these known limitations, this methodology presented a unique opportunity to obtain rich information about the origins of sexual abuse from those who commit these crimes, rather than relying on assumptions drawn from official data. However, the circumstances under which the sets of data were collected differed somewhat between the adult and adolescent cohorts. Most adolescent participants were residing in the community and adults in custody at the time of data collection. This may have impacted perceptions regarding their behaviour. The data for the adult cohort were also more reliant on offender self-report. Although reliability analyses indicated low response-bias and good test-retest reliability, the potential for recall error is acknowledged given that this group was much older than the adolescent cohort. The extent to which these findings can be generalised beyond individuals who have been detected and found guilty is not known, nor can assumptions be made regarding female-perpetrated child sexual abuse. Finally, multiple comparisons were conducted in this study. Rothman's (1990) recommendation to refrain from adjusted significance thresholds was applied due to the exploratory nature of this research, and as such should be considered a platform for further research in this area.

Directions for future research

The findings, limitations and recommendations stemming from this project all provide directions for future research. These include the following.

Replication and extension of these findings

This will help to further clarify the different explanatory factors that predict adolescent-onset and adult-onset child sexual abuse offending to inform criminal justice policy. Several other aetiological factors associated with the perpetration of child sexual abuse (eg social skills deficits, intellectual disability) not investigated in the present study would be valuable avenues for research.

More longitudinal research

Studies like that by Lussier and colleagues (2015) should be prioritised. Qualitative data is also often overlooked but provides rich, detailed content on the context and circumstances surrounding sexual abuse incidents. As Lussier et al. (2015) contend, perhaps those who do not begin offending until adulthood come from a socio-ecological background characterised by more prosocial or protective factors that precluded sexual abuse earlier in life. Asking adult-onset offenders whether they had thought about sexually abusing a child prior to adulthood, and the reasons they did not act on these thoughts, might help elucidate some of the protective factors that precluded earlier-onset offending, which might then help drive early intervention strategies.

Further investigation into proximal influences that produce sexual offending behaviour, especially in adult-onset offending

Ecological and situational influences are important explanatory factors in the onset of sexual abuse. Focusing on how situations (especially emotions) precipitate criminal (and sexual) motivations help to conceptualise sexual offending beyond that of sexual deviance. This allows for better explanations of some incidents of sexually abusive behaviour in adulthood, where childhood experiences may be of less direct influence. Wortley's (2008) situational precipitators theory is a ripe area for research in this regard.

Examining sexual abuse in emerging adulthood

The recent emphasis on 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2000: 469) has forced consideration of appropriate criminal justice responses for offenders under the age of 25 years. In the current study adulthood was defined according to Australian standards (age 18) where individuals are expected to be more independent in terms of living, financial and relationship responsibilities. For this generation, however, this period appears to be a more delayed transition from adolescence into adulthood. It may be timely to examine these features within this specific age group (18–25) to see if they are more similar to the adolescent-onset group or the adult-onset group, to determine whether tailored responses are required for this group.

Concluding remarks

It is without doubt that preventing sexual abuse from occurring in the first place, rather than intervening after it has happened, is the most desirable goal. While recognising that a small number of adolescents persist with sexually abusive behaviours into adulthood, for the most part these adolescents and adults appear to be distinct from each other, with unique criminogenic needs. Their motivations and strategies for engaging in sexual abuse appear to be differentially affected by the experiences, opportunities and constraints that comprise these two life stages. Therefore developmentally appropriate policies and approaches to the prevention of sexual abuse are required. These findings present an important opportunity to reflect on current policies addressing the issue of child sexual abuse in Australia and to promote the development of new strategies for combating sexual abuse of children across the prevention spectrum. The recommendations stemming from this research should be considered a priority for policy development. Discussions on new ways forward are welcomed.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by a Criminology Research Grant. This project builds on and integrates data collected from previous research. The authors would therefore like to acknowledge the previous funders, the Queensland Government and community agencies, as well as the many participants who provided data for this project. The researchers also thank Theresa Jennings and Lauren Fardell for their research support and assistance and Dimity Adams for providing feedback on earlier versions of this paper. The views expressed in this paper do not reflect the official policy or position of the aforementioned people or organisations.

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General editor, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology. Note: *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* papers are peer reviewed. For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series, visit the AIC website at: aic.gov.au

ISSN 0817-8542

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