Sexual Abuse of Children: Can Situational Prevention Work?

Richard Wortley
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Griffith University
Brisbane
Australia
Overview

- Traditional Approaches to Child Sex Offenders
  - Seven myths about child sexual offenders
- Situational Approaches to Child Sexual Abuse
  - Types of offending
  - Settings for child sexual abuse
  - Situational prevention
Traditional Approaches to Child Sex Offenders

- Paedophiles the new ‘dangerous’
- Unprecedented media attention
- Growing vigilantism
- Sex offender treatment programs
- Special laws and provisions
  - Longer sentences
  - Restrictions on parole
  - Dangerous offender legislation
  - Sex offender registers
  - ‘Blue cards’
Current Strategies based on:

- View of offenders as suffering psychopathology
- Identifying and screening risky individuals
- Treating known offenders
- Unhelpful misconceptions and myths about the nature of child sexual abuse
Myth 1: Most child sex offenders target children who are unknown to them and are located in public places

- The myth of ‘stranger danger’
- Self report (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000):
  - 56.5% lived with child
  - 36.9% knew child
  - 6.5% stranger
- Arrests (Simon & Gzoba, 2006):
  - 19.5% parent
  - 24.5% other family
  - 43% acquaintance
  - 12.7% stranger
Myth 2: Most child sex offenders belong to a deviant subculture that involves high levels of networking among its members

- **Before arrest**
  - 8% talked to other offenders (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000)
  - 4% member of paedophile group

- **While in prison**
  - 4% provided with information about accessing children
  - 5% provided with information about clubs
Myth 3: **Most child sex offenders begin to offend sexually at an early age**

- Mean age of first contact 32.4 years (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000)
- Modal age 31-40 years (37% of sample)
- 10.6% 17-20 years
- 6% > 50 years
Myth 4: Most child sex offenders have many victims and will invariably reoffend

- **Number of convictions**
  - 77% first sex offence (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000)

- **Number of victims**
  - 55% one victim
  - 3% >10 victims

- **Recidivism**
  - 13% sex offence after 5 years release; 37% for any offence (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998)
  - Reconviction for a sex offence 19.3% after 32 years (Soothill et al 2000)
Myth 5: Most child sex offenders specialise in sex crimes

- **Prior convictions**
  - 57% non-sex offences (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000)
  - 23% previous sex offences
  - Four time more likely first offence was non-sexual (82% versus 18%)
  - 5% serial specialists

- **Reconvictions**
  - Hood et al (2002) – sex offenders four times more likely to be reconvicted for non-sex offence (8.5 v 30.9%) after 6 years
  - Soothill et al (2000) – child sex offenders four times more likely to be reconvicted for non-sex offence (19.3 v 76.2%) after 32 years
Myth 6: Most child sex offenders have associated diagnosable sexual disorders

- **Low incidence of paraphilia**
  - 5.4% exhibitionism (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000)
  - 9% frotteurism
  - 5% voyeurism
  - 4.2% public masturbation
  - 1.2% sexual masochism

- **Treatment for other problems**
  - 23% for depression
  - 18% drug and alcohol
  - 13% anger problems
Myth 7: Sexual attraction to children is rare and confined to a small group of deviant individuals

- Most people have experience of attraction to children when they were also children
- Freund et al (1972) – non-paedophile males recorded penile volume responses to pre-pubescent boys and girls (though less than for adult female)
- Finkelhor & Lewis (1990) - up to 17% of males admitted having molested a child
- McConaghy & Zamit (1992) – 15% of males admit they would have sexual contact with child if they could get away with it
- Preference for children may post date first sexual contact
Implications:

- Not suggesting child sexual abuse is excusable behaviour, rather

- Am suggesting situational prevention strategies to complement treatment
Situational Approaches to Child Sexual Abuse

- All behaviour is a result of person and situation interaction
- Traditional focus has been on changing the offender
- Crime can be also prevented by altering immediate environments to reduce opportunities and other situational pressures
- Potential to abuse children widespread – mediated by opportunities and breakdown in controls
  - Identify types of offending (who & how?)
  - Identify criminogenic settings (where & when?)
  - Implement tailor-made prevention strategies
Types of offending:

- **Predatory**
  - 23% serial sex offenders
  - Sexually deviant
  - Manipulate environment to create opportunities

- **Opportunistic**
  - 41% first time sex offenders/versatile criminal history
  - Sexually ambivalent/poor self control
  - Respond to temptations

- **Situational**
  - 36% first time for any offence
  - No strong attraction to children/conventional
  - Respond to situational stressors and/or stimulation
Settings for child sexual abuse:

- **Domestic**
  - Home of victim or offender
- **Institutional**
  - Church, scouts, schools etc
- **Public**
  - Parks, public toilets, swimming pools etc
## Locations for finding children (extrafamilial only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At a friend’s home</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby sitting</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through organised activity</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender’s place of employment</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public toilet</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated place (eg river bank)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping mall</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing own children to play with the child</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitchhiking</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child babysitting offender’s child</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Strategies for getting access to child (extrafamilial only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spent time with parent while child was present</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made friends with parent</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped parent around the house</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered to baby sit</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked friends of family to join in in family activities</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered to drive child home from school</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered for child/teen organisation</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established a romantic relationship with a single parent</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Locations for taking child (all offenders)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your own home</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going for a car ride</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated place (eg vacant block)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of the way place in child’s home</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend or relative’s home</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bush</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A park</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public toilet</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming pool</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking the child for walks</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Strategies for being alone with child (all offenders)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was OK to be alone with the child at home</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting them sleep in your bed</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneaking into their room at night</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babysitting</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going for a car ride</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucking them into bed</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going swimming with them</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a shower/bath with them</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking them on overnight trips without their parents</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting the child stay up after parent gone to bed</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On weekend visits (if divorced or separated)</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suggested prevention strategies:

- Increasing effort
  - Controlling access
    - School etc visitors to report to office
    - Employee screening
  - Target hardening
    - Protective behaviours
- Controlling tools
  - Internet pornography control
- **Increasing risk**
  - **Extending guardianship**
    - Teaching parents to recognise grooming
  - **Strengthening formal surveillance**
    - Supervision of employees (eg protocols for dealing with children)
    - Tracking offenders via Internet, credit card, passport
  - **Increasing natural surveillance**
    - Glass panels in doors of interview rooms
    - Design of public toilets
  - **Utilizing place managers**
    - Security staff to recognise grooming
■ Controlling prompts
  ■ Supervising intimate tasks (bathing etc)
  ■ Offenders to avoid tempting situations
  ■ Siblings sharing beds
  ■ Single room accommodation (eg Aboriginal communities)

■ Reducing permissibility
  ■ Alcohol controls (eg Aboriginal communities)
  ■ Dehumanising effects of ‘total institutions’
  ■ Direct challenges (eg via TV)
Conclusions

- Current approaches to child sexual abuse based on misconceptions
  - Preconceived ideas about likely suspects may hamper criminal investigations
  - Screening will not identify most potential offenders
  - Treatment/surveillance of known offenders will not prevent new offenders
- Not all child sex offenders ‘driven’ to offend (at least not initially) – may be deterred by situational interventions before they offend
- Even predatory offenders may be deflected by situational strategies
- Need to avoid ‘siege mentality’
Further Reading

