

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)

At a friend's home	40%
Baby sitting	21%
Through organised activity	20%
Offender's place of employment	20%
Public toilet	13%
Isolated place (eg river bank)	12%
Shopping mall	12%
Park	11%
Church	11%
Allowing own children to play with the child	11%
Hitchhiking	5%
Child babysitting offender's child	5%

Strategies for getting access to child (extrafamilial only)

Spent time with parent while child was present	46%
Made friends with parent	45%
Helped parent around the house	36%
Offered to baby sit	23%
Asked friends of family to join in in family activities	22%
Offered to drive child home from school	19%
Volunteered for child/teen organisation	8%
Established a romantic relationship with a single parent	7%

Locations for taking child (all offenders)

Your own home	69%
Going for a car ride	27%
Isolated place (eg vacant block)	26%
Out of the way place in child's home	20%
Friend or relative's home	17%
The bush	16%
A park	10%
Public toilet	7%
Swimming pool	5%
Taking the child for walks	5%
Playground	3%
Movies	2%

Strategies for being alone with child (all offenders)

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

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

- Smallbone, S.W., & Wortley, R.K. (2001). Child sexual abuse: Offender characteristics and modus operandi. *Australian Institute of Criminology Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No. 193
- Smallbone, S. W., & Wortley, R. (2000). *Child sexual abuse in Queensland: Offender characteristics and modus operandi*. Brisbane: Queensland Crime Commission
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2006) (eds). *Situational prevention of child sexual offending. Crime Prevention Studies*. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press