Trans. #: 192077

Borrower: TLS

Lending String: TXR,*IUA,ILU,TPN,PVA

Patron: Ferguson, Christopher

Journal Title: Journal of child sexual abuse.

Volume: 14 **Issue:** 1
Month/Year: 2005 **Pages:** 75-

Article Author:

Article Title: ; An analysis of females convicted of sex crime in the state of Florida.

Imprint: Binghamton, NY ; Haworth Press, c1992-

ILL #: 27673950

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An Analysis of Females
Convicted of Sex Crimes
in the State of Florida

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ABSTRACT. The phenomenon of female sex offenders has been poorly explored in the scientific literature. In particular, little exploration of possible subtypes of female offenders has been conducted. In the current study, 279 female sexual offenders convicted of a total of 940 separate criminal offenses were examined using hierarchical cluster analysis. Results indicated that female sexual offenders tended to engage in behaviors that fell within three distinct patterns differing according to perpetrator characteristics, victim age, and the use of force. These results suggest that female sexual offenders are a heterogeneous population and a more in-depth investigation may be necessary. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http:// www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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The incidence of sexual contact between adult females and children or other individuals has, until presently, been all but ignored in clinical literature. While some recent studies have suggested that the incidence of female perpetrated sexual abuse may be significant enough to warrant investigation (Allen, 1991; Finklehor, 1984), little remains known about this particular subgroup of sexual offenders. Government statistics suggest that women account for approximately 2-5% of sexual offenses (United States Department of Justice, 1999), which represents approximately 10,000 separate offenses each year. However, it has been noted that sexual crimes committed by females may be less likely to be reported to authorities or to other family members (Banning, 1989). Furthermore, cultural stereotypes of women as disinterested in sexual pleasure or non-violent may contribute to an unwillingness to explore the phenomenon of female perpetrated sexual acts against children or adults (Schwartz & Cellini, 1995).

Female perpetrated sex crimes increased by 119% between 1990 and 1996, though overall, the numbers are still small (US Department of Justice, 1999). While women may react to feelings of anger, rage, or jealousy with violence, it does not appear common for women to sexualize violence relative to males. This may reflect a greater deal of caution and reservation toward sexuality, which may be common among many females. Also, this may be reflective of the greater likelihood of criminal or violent females to target intimates[1] who they may see as outlets for rage, not sexual aggression. Given that males may be more comfortable with sexual aggression than females, targeting adult males or other adult females for sexual aggression may have little instrumental purpose for female offenders. As noted by Thornhill and Palmer (2000) sexual crimes such as rape may have evolved within a subset of males to assist them in securing sexual partners when they otherwise might have had difficulty doing so. As females have fewer such pressures to use force to select mates, this may help explain why males constitute the overwhelming majority of sexual offenders. Similarly, Quinsey and Lalumiere (1995) suggest that sexual offending may have evolved as a function of varying mating strategies and parental involvement as a method of promoting reproductive success. The authors suggest also that sexual offending may result from a mutation or malfunction in sexual preference mechanisms. Incestuous sexual abuse, in particular, represents a breakdown in the normal evolutionary mechanisms, which prevent sex between closely related relatives.

Aside from these observations, it is known that some females do indeed engage in sexual offenses, and many more female sexual offenders

may exist than we are aware of at the current time. Finkelhor and Russell (1984) suggest that females account for as high as eight percent of all sexual offenders, although for male child victims (males under age of 12), the percentage may be somewhat higher. Attempting to explain why fewer sexual offenders are women, they suggest that in general, females are better able to distinguish between sex and aggression, and less likely to take pride in sexual contacts.

In a review of the literature, Wakefield and Underwager (1991) found that the incidence of female perpetrated sex offenses depended upon the definitions of sexual abuse used in the study, and the methodology employed. The authors noted that most studies repudiate the presence of significant mental illness or psychosis in most female sex offenders, although, like many male sex offenders, females may demonstrate poor social skills. Self-reported sexual victimization and abusive backgrounds were also common among female sex offender samples as was a prevailing sense of alienation and loneliness. Much of the abuse took place during care-giving situations. These observations were supported by reviews of the literature conducted by Schwartz and Cellini (1995) and Jennings (1994).

Mayer (1992) suggests that the incidence of female sexual abuse may be greatly under reported noting that in American and much of Western society women are not viewed as sexually aggressive or prone to violence. It may also be possible that women molest males more often, and that males are less likely to report the abuse, even should it occur in childhood. Males are socialized to welcome sex with little reservation and may have ambivalent feelings toward their own abuse, particularly if they enjoyed some physical aspects of the abuse. Furthermore, Mayer notes, a greater level of physical touching is allowed by females. Physical closeness that is considered unusual or inappropriate when initiated by adult males toward children would not cause concern if initiated by a female.

A study of 16 female sexual offenders undergoing treatment (Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Matthews, Mathews, & Speltz, 1991) examined a sample of female sexual offenders to attempt to distinguish between subtypes of female sex offenders. They were able to note three distinct classifications of female sex offenders. The first subtype was the teacher-lover, who primarily targets suggestible adolescent males and seduces them into a quasi-consensual sexual relationship. Women in this subtype may become romanticized objects of their lover's affection, and may be capable of exhibiting an enormous amount of psychological control over their victims. The second subtype was the predisposed sex offender, oftentimes herself a

victim of sexual abuse, who perpetrates sexual abuse, often against her own children. This subtype was likely to act alone, and might mix sexual abuse and physical abuse together. The last subtype was the dependent (or male coerced) offender, who may be coerced into engaging in sexual abuse by a dominant male. Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz (1990) expanded this list to include two additional subtypes including the exploration/exploitation subtype and the psychologically disturbed subtype. The exploration/exploitation subtype is indicative of situations where a female teenager fondles a young child, while the psychologically disturbed subtype in which mental illness is a clear precipitating factor in the abuse.

Kaplan and Green (1995) have noted that female sexual offenders have often themselves been the victims of childhood sexual abuse. In an examination of 11 incarcerated female sex offenders compared with eleven nonsexual offenders, it was noticed that female sexual offenders reported higher levels of child sexual abuse, particularly abuse that occurred within the family. Higher levels of physical abuse were also reported. Interestingly, female sexual offenders reported in engaging in consensual sexual activities at a later age than nonsexual offenders. The sexual offenders typically engaged in denial and minimization of their crimes, and denied engaging in continued fantasies of pedophilic sex. These results are supported by results from a study by Miccio-Fonseca (2000) suggesting that female perpetrators (n = 18) of sexual abuse have endured life circumstances including abuse that differ from other sorts of female offenders (n = 215) or male sexual offenders (n = 332).

McCarty (1986) examined the characteristics of mothers who sexually abused their own children. She notes that female offenders come from a sociological background fraught with violence, abuse, and lack of opportunities or social support. In particular, offenders commonly expressed having been victims themselves as children. Different subtypes of offenders were noted, including independent, co-offender and accomplice offenders. Independent offenders did not engage in sexual abuse in collusion with a male offender. This subtype of offender almost always engaged in some abuse toward daughters, though forty percent also engaged in sexual abuse toward sons as well. Independent offenders were more likely to experience issues related to social stress at the time of their offenses, were more likely to engage in substance abuse, and were more likely to abuse very young victims. By contrast, co-offenders were more likely to have borderline retarded intelligence, and more likely to exhibit symptoms of a dependent personality. Such offenders may put the welfare of their children secondary to their own needs for dependency on a dominant male.

Faller (1995) presents a somewhat more comprehensive look at a larger sample of female sex offenders (n = 72) who between them had abused a total of 332 children. In the majority of the cases, the abuse was intrafamilial, though 21 cases involved both intra and extrafamilial abuse, and 18 cases involved extrafamilial abuse only. Physical abuse of their children was found to be the most common coexisting circumstance, though a significant number of the women experienced mental health related problems, and 16 had mental retardation. A large number (37) of the women also engaged in substance abuse. This study begins to show a picture of female sexual offenders as highly deviant and emotionally unwell.

Other aspects of the research currently available have examined categorical typologies of females and the utility of categorical systems as a heuristic for understanding differing potential pathways to sexual abuse perpetration. Although such categorical systems may present an unrealistically rigid portrayal of offender behavior, an analysis of patterns of behavior can be instructive in guiding treatment approaches for a heterogeneous population. As a result of this negligence in the literature, treatments of female sexual abuse perpetration continue to be largely borrowed from the literature on male sexual offenders (Chow & Choy, 2002).

It is the purpose of the present study to examine the characteristics and behavior of convicted female sex offenders for potential trends or patterns. As such, data on a number of female sex offenders within the Florida State Correctional system were examined in order to elucidate possible behavioral trends among this population of offenders.

The second purpose of the study is to examine the extent to which age of the perpetrator and length of criminal history would predict the amount of force used in the commission of sexual abuse of children by female perpetrators; particularly whether such factors could predict the severity of criminal offenses. Specifically, as violent male sexual offenders have been observed to use greater amounts of violence over time (Holmes, 1991), it was hypothesized that this trend would prove true for females as well. This study is intended to lend preliminary support to the existence of general trends in behavior among female sexual offenders.

METHODS

Participants

Data on 279 convicted female sexual perpetrators were obtained from the Florida Department of Corrections. Participants included both women cur-

rently incarcerated for sexual offenses, as well as women on parole, probation or other community supervision for sexual offenses. Women convicted of sex crimes against both children and adults were considered. Regarding the ethnicity of these women, 217 (77%) were Caucasian, 56 (20%) were African-American, 4 (2%) were Hispanic, and 2 (1%) endorsed the "other" category. Their average age at the time of the offense for which they were arrested was 29 (Range: 17-60; Median: 27.8; Mode: 19.8). Regarding the offense region (physical location) of these women, 65 (23%) were arrested in an urban area while the remaining 214 (77%) were arrested in rural areas or counties. Incarcerated prisoners accounted for 101 (36%) of the women including 7 capital or life offenders, women on parole or probation made up the remaining 178 (64%). Of these women, 68 (24%) had previous criminal convictions in the state of Florida. Of those 68 women with previous convictions, 43 (15% of total sample) had one previous conviction for a sex crime and 16 (6% of total sample) had multiple previous convictions. It was not known how many women had previous convictions in other states. As this information pertained only to adult criminal records, it was not known how many participants may have had criminal histories or sexual offending histories during their adolescence. Demographic information for the offenders in this study is presented in Table 1.

Although psychological testing was not conducted on the offenders, extensive behavioral and legal data were made available. This information consisted of archival data kept in a computer database at the Department of Corrections headquarters. This data represents all females either incarcerated or on parole, probation, or community supervision for sex related offenses (not including non-victim crimes such as prostitution) during July of 2000. The participants of this study were convicted of 940 separate criminal offenses. Unfortunately, this data set did not contain information relating to documented abuse history for the women in this sample, nor did it contain information pertaining to the relationship between the perpetrator and her victim.

Statistical Analysis

Each participant's offense record included data on the involvement and level of force used in the commission of the crime, whether homicide was involved in the crime, the general age of the victim (child, adolescent, or above age 16) and status of the victim (no status, physically handicapped, mentally handicapped). Data on the offender was also made available including, age at the time the offense was committed, race, number of times convicted, information regarding the amount of force used during the commission of the crime, and whether the of-

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Females Convicted of Sex Crimes in Florida

Mean Age	29
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	217 (77%)
African-American	56 (20%)
Hispanic	4 (2%)
Other	2 (1%)
Offence Region	
Urban	65 (23%)
Rural	214 (77%)
Sentencing	
Incarceration	101 (36%)
Parole/Probation	178 (64%)
Previous Convictions*	68 (24%)
One Previous Sex Crime Conviction	43 (15%)
Multiple Previous Sex Crime Convictions	16 (6%)

*Including both sexual and non-sexual offenses.

fender was the primary offender, or an accessory. In regards to the force variable, "simple assault" was defined as incidents in which touching was used but no visible injury resulted (e.g., pushing, holding down, restraining, etc.). "Aggravated assault" was defined as incidents which resulted in visible injury (e.g., hitting, kicking, etc.). "Mutilation or disfigurement" referred to situations in which a serious or long-term injury resulted (e.g., severe genital damage, injuries resulting in permanent scarring). Although this data was initially coded by the Department of Corrections, the researchers rechecked the consistency of this data.

In situations in which one individual was charged with multiple forms of assault during a given incident, the most severe form of assault took precedence. Unfortunately, as the Florida Department of Corrections maintains data in categorical rather than continuous form, some variance was lost in the subsequent analysis. Though this would likely reduce the power of the analysis, it was not considered likely that the validity of any significant findings would be affected. By contrast, in the absence of a high degree of power, any significant findings would likely be robust.

These variables were analyzed using a Hierarchical Cluster Analysis using Ward's clustering method (a standard cluster analysis technique that uses principle components data reduction procedures) and Pearson correlation distance measures to search for latent behavioral clusters among these offenders. Hierarchical Cluster Analysis is a statistical technique used within behavioral sciences to look for patterns or trends in behavior among a sample of individuals. This analysis examines available data to look for groupings or associations within that data, for example offender characteristics (e.g., age and level of force used to commit a crime) that tend to be associated with each other. This statistical approach can thus be used to identify clusters of individuals, which resemble each other in regards to their behavior or characteristics. Hierarchical Cluster Analysis then bears some similarity to Factor Analysis, though it is typically used to group similarities among individuals rather than items on a test. Within the current sample this technique was selected for its ability to identify trends within groups of individuals (e.g., some offenders may be older women who use a high degree of force, while others may be younger women who are more passive in the commission of their crimes, etc.) To control for the unequal scaling of variables all scores were changed into standardized Z-scores prior to the analysis. The hypothesis of the study was analyzed by the inclusion of age at the time of offense, race, number of times convicted, victim age, victim status, and offense qualifier into a linear regression equation.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis of this sample of female sexual perpetrators revealed some findings that differ from traditional perspectives on female sexual offenders. First was the use of force in the commission of sexual offenses. Of the crimes committed in this sample, only 7.4% involved neither the use of force, nor the threat of force. Threat but no actual force was used during 6.5% of the crimes. The majority of offenses (86.1%) in the current sample involved some degree of physical force. In 64% of the cases, the maximum level of force used culminated in a simple assault. In 4.4% of cases, the maximum level of force used resulted in an aggravated assault. A surprisingly large percentage (17.3% of the total sample) used enough force to cause genital mutilation or permanent disfigurement. Infrequently (0.7% of the total sample), an offender killed a victim in the context of a sexual crime. Table 2

presents a detailed summary of the amount of force used in these sexual offenses.

The extent to which perpetrators in this sample were primary offenders rather than accessories challenged traditional expectations that female sexual offenders are typically reliant on a dominant partner in the commission of their crimes. In this sample, 97.3% of perpetrators were primary offenders. In regards to the victims' age, most of the victims in this sample (67.7%) were between the ages of 12 and 16; 15.3% were under 12, 7.1% were adults, and the ages of the remaining 9.9% victims were not reported by the Department of Corrections.

Results of the hierarchical cluster analysis suggested that the characteristics and behaviors of female sexual offenders tended to fall within three main trends. The first group of offenders (n = 71; 25.4%) were slightly younger (mean age 26 at the time of arrest), more likely to choose victims who were under the age of 12, and more likely to use verbal coercion rather than direct force in the commission of their crimes. Interestingly, the women who killed their victims also fell within this grouping. The second grouping of offenders (n = 100; 35.8%) were older (mean age 30), had more previous criminal convictions, and used the highest level of physical force (i.e., aggravated assault) in the commission of their crimes. The last group of offenders (n = 108; 38.7%) occupied a middle ground in terms of the amount of force used, but were most likely to choose older victims, particularly adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16. Tables 3a-b presents statistical results of the hierarchical cluster analysis.

One of the most salient qualities of this cluster analysis is the difference in the use of force between younger and older female offenders. It may be that this analysis is sensitive to an increase in the use of force over time among female sexual offenders. In other words, female sexual offenders may gradually become more aggressive over time, increasing the amount of force directed towards their victims. Younger offenders may be more timid, or possibly gentler with their victims. It could be, although this is a question for further study, that these women may be experiencing feelings of frustration or anger that increase over time. This frustration then may result in increasing levels of aggression. As such, these results highlight the importance of early intervention for female sexual offenders. Failure to adequately intervene with emerging female sexual offenders may place subsequent victims at increasingly greater risk.

TABLE 2. Maximum Force Level Used in Female Perpetrated Sexual Crimes

No force	7.4%
Threat	6.5%
Simple Assault	64%
Aggravated Assault	4.4%
Mutilation/Disfigurement	17%
Death	0.7%

TABLE 3a. ANOVA Results for Cluster Groupings

Variable	Degrees of Freedom	F-Value	Significance
Age	2, 276	5.69	$p \le .01$
Race	2, 276	163.75	$p \le .001$
Times Convicted	2, 276	254.22	$p \le .001$
Level of Force Used	2, 276	50.33	$p \le .001$
Victim Killed	2, 276	11.25	$p \le .01$
Victim Age	2, 276	26.43	$p \le .001$
Disabled Victim	Not Significant		
Accessory to Crime	Not Significant		

TABLE 3b. Number of Cases in Each Cluster

Cluster		
	1	71
	2	100
	3	108
Valid		279
Missing		.000

The regression equation which tested the hypothesis that age and length of criminal history would predict the level of force used was significant, $r = .244$, $p < .001$. Results indicated that number of times convicted, and thus length of criminal history was a more important predictor of force level rather than age per se. Table 4 presents statistical results from the linear regression equation.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the criminal behaviors of this sample of convicted female sexual perpetrators has demonstrated a preliminary basis for under-

TABLE 4. Regression Results and Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adj.R Square	Std. Err.of Est.	Change Stat. R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.244	.060	.054	1.0323	.060	9.871	6	933	.000

Predictors: (Constant), QUALIFIE, RACE, VICAGE, VICSTATU, AGE, TIMESCON

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	63.114	6	10.519	9.871	.000
	Residual	994.259	933	1.066		
	Total	1057.373	939			

Predictors: (Constant), QUALIFIE, RACE, VICAGE, VICSTATU, AGE, TIMESCON
Dependent Variable: FORCE

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.664	.460		10.149	.000
	AGE	−2.419E-03	.004	−.018	−.548	.584
	RACE	4.376E-02	.082	.018	.532	.595
	TIMESCON	−8.493E-02	.026	−.110	−3.325	.001
	VICAGE	6.944E-02	.046	.048	1.507	.132
	VICSTATU	−.156	.201	−.025	−.772	.440
	QUALIFIE	−.415	.064	−.205	−6.439	.000

Dependent Variable: FORCE
Note. AGE = age of perpetrator; RACE = race of perpetrator;
TIMESCON = Times perpetrator has been convicted;
FORCE = Level of force used by perpetrator;
HOMICIDE = Victim killed during commission of crime;
VICAGE = Age grouping of victim;
VICSTATUS = Mental and physical status of victim;
QUALIFIE = Perpetrator as primary or accessory offender.

standing latent behavioral groups of female offenders. These findings suggest that subtypes of female sexual offenders differ in regards to the length of criminal history, amount of force used, age of commission of specific crimes, and victim age. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of offenses in the study (86.1%) involved some degree of force above verbal coercion or seduction. This may be the result of the "vio-

lence heavy" loading in the criminal justice system, in which more serious offenders are likely to be overrepresented in any sample due to the longer length of their sentences. Offenders who use less violence may be underrepresented, or have their cases resolved at the county, rather than state level. This seems particularly true as these violence rates exceed those observed in general male samples of child sexual abusers (Bagley & Pritchard, 2000). Thus the current sample likely represents a group of particularly violently prone female sexual offenders. It is interesting to note as well that the majority of female offenders in this sample (97.3%) were identified as primary offenders, rather than accessories. There may be several explanations for this observation, many of which possibly are acting in conjunction with each other. The first may be differences in sampling technique between this sample (in which archival data on all female offenders was included) and many of the other samples of female offenders (in which small samples of volunteers are included). Women who volunteer for treatment (either in the community or in prison), and actively seek help, in particular, may be quite different from the average incarcerated female offender. It is also possible that the State of Florida's policies for arrest and incarceration may be creating a skewed sample, or that the criminal justice system may have stringent limits on what qualifies one as being an "accessory" to a crime.

These findings, while preliminary, provide support for the hypothesis that identifiable behavioral groupings or clusters exist among female perpetrators of sexual assault. Likely with the inclusion of more detailed psychological testing data, the underlying personality characteristics of female perpetrators would become identifiable. It should also be noted that some overlap between clusters would be expected. Individual perpetrators may not always conform strictly to the behaviors expected for a given subtype. Thus, this behavioral grouping is presented as a useful heuristic in understanding the behavioral trends of female sexual offenders, not as a rigid and inflexible model.

The results of the regression equation suggest that there is a tendency for female sexual offenders to engage in higher levels of violence particularly related to the length of their criminal career. This trend may be mitigated by other factors, however, including personality of the offender, situational variables, and specific relationship between offender and victim.

The current study is limited in several ways. First, psychological data, such as personality and intelligence testing, as well as documented abuse history of the perpetrators was not available. Similarly, data on the relationship between the perpetrator and victim was not made available by

the Department of Corrections. Inclusion of such data into the cluster analysis would undoubtedly provide for a more powerful analysis. Further, the Department of Corrections data set relies on legal constructs (e.g., what legally constitutes "permanent disfigurement") which may differ from one state to another. Nonetheless, attempting to impose new criteria for these constructs was not viewed as an improvement but rather as another alternative, thus the legal constructs were retained. Therefore, this study is viewed as evidence in support of behavior trends or categories of female offenders, while providing direction for future research that may examine the psychological variables that may explain the motivation of these offenders. Secondly, as all of the offenders in this study were under the jurisdiction of the Florida Department of Corrections, the generalizability of the current study is limited. Even within the state of Florida, the current sample consists only of those offenders who were convicted of their crimes and sentenced to incarceration or probation. As such, the current sample does not include offenders who were not arrested, acquitted, or received only minor penalties (i.e., fines). It may be that, in particular, the high level of force observed in this sample would not be observed across all populations of female sex offenders.

It would be beneficial for future research to focus on continuing to examine the underlying psychological characteristics of these three subtypes of female sexual perpetrators, as well as to trace specific etiological mechanisms for each subtype that may lead to preventative efforts. In particular, research focused on tracing an etiological path for female sexual offending through adolescence and adulthood would be enlightening. Empirical research on treatment approaches for female sexual offenders which focus on their criminal behavior, rather than providing rationalizations for their crimes, also needs to be developed.

NOTE

1. Female serial murderers, for instance are less likely to use sex in the commission of their crimes, but are more likely to target their own families, than are male serial murderers (Holmes & Holmes, 1998).
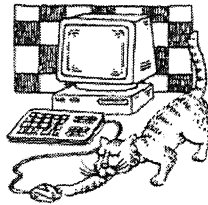
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