

NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.



Volume 5, Issue 2

February 2012

Dear Colleague,

This month's issue features the first article we have found about adolescents who sexually abuse in a group or in a gang. Based upon a few studies about adults, the authors proposed that leaders of these gangs would be significantly different from the teens who followed someone into this kind of sexually abusive situation. The only significant difference between leaders and followers identified in this study was that the followers had more social impairments. With that deficit, the leader was able to use loyalty or intimidation to ensure that the followers reinforced the sexual assault. However, the authors noted that further research was needed to use these findings in treatment or prevention programming.

As always, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us at info@nearipress.org or call us at 413-540-0712 x14.

Sincerely,

Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

What we know about adolescents who sexually abuse in groups

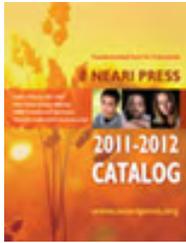
by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

Question

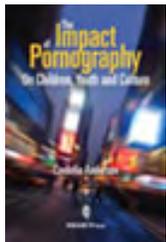
What do we know about adolescents who sexually abuse in a group or a gang?

The Research

't Jart-Kerkhoffs, Vermeiren, Jansen, and Doreleijers conducted a study on 89 adolescents in the Netherlands who had participated in group rapes. Typically, the committed offenses were of high severity and consisted of rape, often accompanied by excessive violence. The researchers indicate that between 11% and 80% of juvenile offenses in the Netherlands are committed in groups. This study examined the differences in intelligence and offense-related psychosocial characteristics of juvenile group sex offenders. Contrary to the researchers' expectations, their study revealed little difference between leaders and followers with the exception of leaders having more emotional problems (an unexpected result), followers using more force, and followers having more social impairments than leaders. The social impairments found in the followers supports previous research that through loyalty or intimidation, the intentions of the leader become the actions of the entire group. The researchers hypothesized the lack of greater difference might have been due to: 1) the small number of leaders being studied, and 2) changing roles within the group during the offenses (e.g., leaders initiating or encouraging the group to act, but followers taking on leadership roles once the offense had been initiated). As with many other studies, this research found extremely low levels of sexual recidivism, but high levels of general delinquency. Further, the study did reveal high levels of trauma experience in both leaders and followers, up to 80% experiencing at



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least one traumatic life event (a recurring risk factor in a number of risk assessment studies with juveniles).

Implications for Professionals

This is one of the only studies of adolescent group sexual behavior although a few have been conducted for adults. As the authors themselves indicate, more research is needed to identify differentiating factors, if any, amongst those who are leaders, those who are willing followers and those who are reluctant followers. The heinous nature of many group rape offenses often prompts a common view of all group participants. From this study, the question of difference remains open, but anecdotal clinical observation suggests there may be significant differences amongst group members requiring different case formulations, treatment plans, and risk management strategies. As is becoming increasingly apparent, professionals must conduct very careful developmentally sensitive risk assessments to truly understand sex offending behaviors. This may be even more critical in group offending situations in order to avoid seeing all participants as identical.

Implications for the Field

Given the severity and violence associated with most group sex offenses, there is a compelling need for greater understanding of:

- The role of emotional problems in group offenders,
- The difference if any amongst group members,
- The types of prevention strategies that can mitigate against delinquent group bonding, and
- The skills required to weaken peer-influenced sexual behaviors.

Further, given the unanimity of studies both in the United States and now in the Netherlands indicating the low risk of sexual recidivism, but the very high risk of general criminal recidivism, practitioners need to consider the knowledge and research from the general delinquency literature as we consider further research in our field. Last, with trauma as a frequently recurring factor amongst juveniles who offend, early identification and intervention with males who have experienced physical, emotional or sexual insults may be a promising prevention approach.

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate group sex offenses with regard to the role of leaders versus followers and to compare both groups on levels of psychopathology, intelligence, and psychosocial and offense-related characteristics. Eighty-nine adolescent group sex offenders (mean age = 14.9, SD = 1.4) referred by the police to the Dutch child protection agency were examined. Psychopathology, intelligence, and psychosocial and offense-related characteristics were assessed by means of standardized instruments, and criminal careers of the participants were ascertained from official judicial records. Although leaders and followers were similar on many

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characteristics, some remarkable differences were found. During their sexual acts, followers reported using excessive force more frequently than leaders. Furthermore, leaders reported more emotional problems, whereas followers were characterized by higher levels of problems in the social relational domain. As the findings indicate that juvenile group sex offenders constitute a group with specific mental health needs, diagnostic investigation is important to recognize risk factors and (treatable) problems. The absence of some expected differences between leaders and followers could be due to the method of classification or because group offending constitutes a dynamic process without clearly defined roles for individuals.

Citation

- 't Hart-Kerkhoffs, L., Vermeiren, R.R.J., Jansen L.M.C., and Doreleijers, T.A.H. (2011). Juvenile Group Sex Offenders: A Comparison of Group Leaders and Followers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26,3-20.

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