

Research Brief

The purpose of this research brief is to synthesize prior research on risk and preventative factors for child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetration, while highlighting special offender populations. Researchers can use this data to enhance further research on sex offenders and the psychological processes of CSA perpetrators.

Whitaker, D. J., Le, B., Hanson, B. R., Baker, C. K., McMahon, P. M., Ryan, G., Klein, A., & Rice, D. D. (2008). Risk factors for the perpetration of child sexual abuse: A review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 32, 529-548. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.08.005

Aims: Much of the research on child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetration from the past twenty years focuses on social and psychological risk factors. This study reviewed over 10 years of research and summarizes key risk factors identified by this evidence.

Methods: Whitaker et al. reviewed 89 studies published between 1990 and 2003 on CSA perpetration risk. The authors examined six categories of risk factors: family risk factors (history of abuse, poor family functioning including harsh discipline, and poor family attachment), externalizing behaviors (aggression/violence, anger/hostility, substance abuse, non-violent criminality, mistrust), internalizing behaviors (history of mental illness, anxiety and low self-esteem), social deficits (low social skills, loneliness, difficulties with intimate relationships), sexual problems (deviant sexual interest), and cognitions/attitudes tolerant of adult-child sex

and minimizing the perpetrator's culpability. The study compared perpetrators of child sexual abuse with perpetrators of adult sexual violence, non-sex offenders, and non offenders.

Key Results

- Sexual offenders who target children demonstrated substantial differences from non-offenders in all six categories.
- Sexual offenders against children were more likely than non-offenders to:
 - have a history of child sexual abuse
 - report experiencing harsh discipline as a child
 - have antisocial personality
 - difficulty with intimate relationships
 - report loneliness
- Sexual offenders who target children did not differ significantly from sexual offenders who target adults, except that the former showed lower rates of externalizing behaviors (i.e., aggression/violence, substance abuse, non-violent criminality, etc.).

Summary: Because CSA perpetrators show significant deviation from non-offenders in relation to several risk factors, multiple variables may increase the risk of CSA perpetration.



Application: This research may help professionals identify individuals and populations for CSA perpetration and assist them in the development of appropriate preventative strategies.

Future Research Needs: Because this research review revealed many similarities between perpetrators who target children and those who target adults, additional research on distinct risk factors for each group would be beneficial for the field. Similarly, additional research on protective factors would assist practitioners. Finally, research on sexual offenders who target both adults and children as a comparison group would enrich research on the sex offender population.

Becker, J. V. (1994). Offenders: Characteristics and treatment. *The Future of Children*, 4, 177-197. doi:10.2307/1602530

Aims: Becker reviewed research on CSA perpetrators, highlighting the role of deviant sexual interests and behaviors (paraphilias) in CSA perpetration. Becker also discusses characteristics of CSA perpetrators, problems in determining recidivism rates, and the efficacy of sexual offender treatment measures.

Method: Becker reviews the body of literature on sexual offenders, focusing on offender backgrounds, offender sexual deviance, etiology, recidivism, and treatment.

Key Results:

- CSA perpetrators are a diverse group in terms of both background and perpetration modus operandi, but many share traits in common, such as paraphilia, a history of physical and/or sexual abuse, and early deviant sexual interests.
- Research suggests that multiple variables increase risk of CSA perpetration. Therefore, sexual offender research needs comprehensive, empirically-based theories to address the etiology of CSA perpetration.

- Due to flaws in recording sexual offense reports and convictions, it is difficult to measure child sexual abuse recidivism accurately. While no statistics should be taken as definitive, multiple research sources can provide a reasonable picture of recidivism rates.
- The mental health profession has made strides in juvenile sexual offender treatment, but other fields (especially the criminal justice system) are in need of education on juvenile offending and treatment. Specialized, coordinated services and treatment for all CSA perpetrators is needed.

Summary: Many of Becker's observations are still accurate in regard to the field's understanding of CSA perpetrators and subsequent research has confirmed many of Becker's observations, such as the role of multiple risk factors in CSA perpetration.

Applications: This research review can help service providers recognize and address CSA perpetration risk factors in at-risk individuals and populations.

Future Research Needs: Comprehensive, empirically-based theories on the etiology of CSA perpetration that take multiple risk factors into account would enrich the body of research on child sexual abuse.

Oliver, B. E. (2007). Preventing female-perpetrated sexual abuse. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 8, 19-32. doi:10.1177/1524838006296747

Aims: While the majority of sexual violence is perpetrated by men, researchers are devoting greater attention to female sexual offenders, an under-recognized category of perpetrators. Oliver discusses the scope and nature of female sexual perpetration.

Methods: Oliver reviews research on female sexual perpetrators and female-perpetrated sexual abuse, identifying characteristics of female offenders, similarities and differences between male and female offenders, and gaps in the body of research.

Key Results:

- Female sexual offenders rarely target adults, but usually choose child or juvenile victims.
- There are several reasons that might explain why female sexual offending is under-recognized: the perception that female sexual abuse is less harmful than abuse committed by males; the glorification of sexual contact between adult females and underage males; greater taboo surrounding female perpetration; and stereotypes which portray females as sexually passive.
- Juvenile female sexual offenders tend to have a different modus operandi than adult female sexual offenders. Statistically, juvenile female perpetrators tend to offend independently, to target younger children of both sexes, to offend in the course of care-giving activities, and have incestuous offenses more often than their adult female counterparts.
- Female and male sexual offenders tend to be similar in ethnicity and age, and show similar statistical rates of psychopathology and personality characteristics. They also tend to be in professional positions of authority, such as teachers. However, female perpetrators are more likely than their male counterparts to have been victims of incestuous sexual abuse, to have experienced severe and ongoing sexual abuse before age six, to have post-traumatic stress disorder, and to have attempted suicide.

Summary: Many studies and theoretical frameworks in the body of child sexual abuse research center on male perpetrators, which may lead researchers to overlook the risk and impact of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse. The research to date suggests patterns of both similarity and difference between male and female perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

Applications: The differences between male

and female perpetrators in terms of their own victimization histories suggest the importance of trauma-related components in treatment for female offenders. Oliver recommends therapeutic intervention with female victims of sexual abuse who may be at risk for CSA perpetration. Additionally, the author discusses cognitive distortions, deviant sexual arousal, and education on child sexual abuse as intervention points for prevention of female CSA perpetration.

Future research needs: Research on gender as a risk factor for CSA perpetration would help the field construct a more accurate picture of CSA prevention.

Righthand, S., & Welch, C. (2001). *Juveniles who have sexually offended: A review of the professional literature*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/184739.pdf>

Aims: While juvenile offenders are a diverse group, their developmental issues and treatment needs are distinct from those of adult offenders. The authors discuss juvenile sexual offender traits, assessment approaches and treatment approaches and efficacy.

Method: The authors review the body of research on juvenile sexual offenders, with attention to characteristics of juvenile offenders, classifications of offenders, assessment, and treatment.

Key Results:

- Victims of juvenile sexual abuse are more likely to be female, to be substantially younger than their juvenile perpetrators, and to be relatives or acquaintances of their perpetrators. Specific types of perpetration, such as sibling incest and female-perpetrated sexual abuse, may be under-reported.
- Statistically, several variables are correlated with juvenile sexual offending, such as childhood sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, perpetration of non-sexual crimes,

social deficits, deviant sexual arousal, and various psychopathologies. Special offender populations, such as females, pre-adolescent offenders, and offenders with developmental disabilities or mental retardation, may have distinct risk factors.

- Few studies have addressed rates or risk factors for recidivism among juvenile sex offenders. Statistics suggest that juvenile recidivism rates are relatively low (8%-14%), but few variables have been empirically associated with recidivism risk.
- Research suggests that addressing deviant sexual arousal, working toward relapse prevention, and encouraging family cooperation are promising components of treatment.

Summary: Juvenile sexual offenders represent a special population of CSA perpetrators, underscoring the need to recognize risk and preventative factors for CSA perpetration among youth.

Application: This document may help service providers recognize risk factors for juvenile sexual offending and provide appropriate treatment to juvenile sexual offenders. It may influence policymakers, as it concludes there is no evidence to suggest that once a sex offender, always a sex offender.

Future Research Needs: Additional research on risk and preventative factors for juvenile recidivism would enrich the body of research on child sexual abuse. Additionally, special populations of juvenile sexual offenders, such as females, pre-adolescents, and juvenile offenders with developmental disabilities, should be the focus of additional research.

Conclusion

Much research on CSA risk factors, including the research highlighted in this brief, draws upon self-reports from prison, psychiatric, and sex offender treatment program populations. Methodological concerns may arise with sex offender research that draws solely from these populations, as other sex offender populations may be excluded. Given the difficulty of locating CSA perpetrators outside of these populations, however, this methodological concern is difficult to circumvent. Future research on this topic would be beneficial to the field.

This research brief was compiled by Emily Dworkin, with contributions from Hallie Martyniuk, and is part of a *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Information Packet*. Contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center for more information: <http://www.nsvrc.org> or 877-739-3895.

