

Similarities and Differences Between Female and Male Sexual Offenders

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According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about 10,000 women are arrested every year for violent sexual offenses in the United States. Women represent 7 percent of adults who are arrested for sexual offenses each year and adolescent girls represent 27 percent of juveniles arrested for sexual offenses. Just how are these female sexual offenders similar to male offenders and how do they differ?

Similarities

Relationship difficulties—Both male and female sexual offenders have been found to have difficulty developing and maintaining long-term, stable relationships. Strong relationships are built on communication, confidence, and assertiveness. Feelings of inadequacy and personal insecurities undermine an individual's ability to use social skills and negotiate the normal flow of interpersonal relationships. Because both male and female sexual offenders tend to lack social skills and confidence, their relationships suffer and they often find themselves lacking the support and companionship of other adults.

Poor coping skills—A lack of problem-solving abilities is also shared by male and female sexual offenders. When faced with challenges, it is difficult for sexual offenders to develop strategies for solving the problem or minimizing its negative effects. Studies of men and women who sexually offend show that they generate fewer options for problem solving and that the options they do identify are more likely to be ineffective or to exacerbate the difficulty.

Cognitive distortions and immaturity—Men and women who sexually offend are both prone to thinking errors relating to victims and themselves. Both groups tend to regard themselves as victims and to justify their actions based on beliefs that are not in sync with the rest of society. They place blame on the actual victims and describe incidents in such a way that places responsibility on the child as if he or she were in control of the situation. Emotional immaturity is also common in both men and women who sexually abuse, as is the view of themselves as having little or no control over their own lives.

Victim empathy deficits—Neither male nor female sexual offenders demonstrate the ability to understand the harm done to child and adolescent victims of sexual abuse. This is particularly true for “grooming” type offenders who rely on the strength of their relationships with young people to encourage the child to keep the secret of abuse. Because physical force is rarely involved in these types of situations, the offender maintains a belief that the child is consensual and perhaps encouraging the sexual activity. Once sexual abuse is disclosed, both male and female offenders develop rationales for why the child or youth is no longer keeping the secret, such as pressure from parents or guardians, attention-seeking, or monetary gain. Full acknowledgement of the harm they have caused is exceptional among sexual offenders of both genders.

Differences

More traumatic abuse histories exist among female offenders—Severe childhood trauma represents a more significant risk factor in females than it does in males. Although intuitively appealing, the clear connection between childhood abuse and future sexual offending has never really been solidified in the research on male sexual offenders. Many women who sexually offend have been found to have suffered severe sexual abuse and extreme physical abuse. Moreover, the childhoods of many female offenders contain

additional elements of trauma such as family violence, multiple and irregular caregivers, and substance abuse by family members.

More deprivation in childhood—Women who sexually offend versus men who sexually offend and versus women who are involved in other types of crimes more often appear to have been raised in circumstances of physical and emotional deprivation. Physical neglect, poor living conditions, lack of food, and lack of medical care are more common among women who sexually offend.

Abuse is more likely to occur while providing childcare—Unlike male sexual offenders who tend to abuse from positions of trust in families or other informal relationships, women and adolescent girls are more likely to abuse while in paid or formal childcare roles such as babysitting. This distinction may arise from the greater accessibility that is afforded to females in childcare roles. Females are often screened and supervised less than males even though they are generally placed in higher access positions that may involve bathing, dressing, and other personal care responsibilities.

More likely to abuse younger children—Although there are females who target adolescents of both genders, women and adolescent girls are more likely to abuse younger children than male offenders. The typical age of children sexually abused by females in childcare is between three and six years old and early research suggests females are more likely than are male offenders to target children under eight years old.

Conclusion

Until recently, sexual offending by women and adolescent girls has been largely overlooked and minimized in the professional literature and in everyday life. Research into the dynamics of female sexual abuse has just begun. What we have learned to this point is that the research on male sexual offenders will take us only so far. Specific research and practice of treating female sexual offenders and their victims is needed if we are to prevent and respond properly to this unique form of abuse.

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