



Greetings!

Whenever we ask our readership for topics of interest, female offenders are typically mentioned. For this month, the NEARI Press newsletter article explored group sexual offending by adolescent girls. The study acknowledged the lack of research in this area as well as the small numbers of adolescent females who enter into the system. The study confirmed that while adolescent girls do participate in group offending, they most often do so with some male offenders and will do so – at least in part – as a result of some group influence (e.g., peer pressure) or as a means to commit a crime rather than for sexual gratification alone. This study also highlights how personal history and interpersonal processes can create vulnerabilities to commit sexual crimes. Therefore, the role of social influence in sex crimes committed by adolescent females is worthy of strong clinical attention.

We hope you find this newsletter compelling as much as we do in writing it. As always, if you have any other questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,
Craig Latham and Joan Tabachnick

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Group Sexual Offending by Juvenile Females

AUTHORS: Miriam Wijkman, Frank Weerman, Catrien Bijleveld, and Jan Hendriks

QUESTION: What can science tell us about adolescent females in the Netherlands who sexually abuse in groups?

RESEARCH: This research studied all cases of group sexual offending in the Netherlands that involved at least one adolescent female. Although the sample size was small (n=35), it comprises all adolescent females adjudicated for a sexual offense between 1994 and 2008. The authors, Miriam Wijkman, Frank Weerman, Catrien Bijleveld, and Jan Hendriks, noted that there are very few research studies on adolescent females who commit a sexual offense and even fewer that do so in groups. All studies to date acknowledged the small sample sizes available. Previous studies of co-offending behaviors reported a high rate of co-offending behaviors among adolescent girls, varying between 50-60%.

The factors explored in this study include characteristics of the adolescents who sexually abused as a part of a group, the characteristics of the group sexual offense, the background and ways that the offenses evolved, and how each person in the "event"

interacted with each other. In addition, the authors investigated the different perspectives about why these adolescents committed a sexual offense in a group.

In the literature, three perspectives may explain co-offending behaviors among these adolescent females. They are:

- Group influence (e.g., peer pressure, fear of being ridiculed, loyalty to their group, attempts to solidify a friendship, or status enhancement);
- Social selection (e.g., select each other based upon similar characteristics such as low self-control or a preference for non-conventional behavior);
- Instrumental perspective (e.g., it is an easier, more convenient, or less risky offense with the group involved).

The results showed that the majority of adolescent girls described their actions as a result of group influence (63%). One was quoted saying "*I was dragged into everything by my co-offenders; I could not assess the consequences.*" The remaining adolescents (31%) co-offended for instrumental reasons and typically for reasons of revenge. In these situations, the female may have used a male peer to humiliate the victim or the male may have used a female to gain access to other females or younger children. Unlike their male counterparts, adolescent girls rarely use sexually offending for sexual gratification.

When exploring more about the adolescents who committed the crime, the authors found that the majority (63%) experienced some psychological disturbance and/or victimization.

One striking difference between the acts committed by males and females in groups is that while 95% of all-male groups penetrated the victim, a much lower percent, 53%, of the groups with a female involved penetration. Another key difference is that none of the females threatened the victims to prevent a report to the police.

BOTTOM LINE: While adolescent girls in the Netherlands do participate in group offending, they most often do so with some male offenders and will do so – at least in part – as a result of some group influence (e.g., peer pressure) or as a means to commit a crime.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS: While it is well known that problematic sexual behaviors by adolescent females differ from males in important ways, this study highlights how personal history and interpersonal processes can create vulnerabilities to commit sexual crimes. Obviously, not everyone who experiences peer pressure gives in to it. However, the role of social influence in sex crimes committed by adolescent females is worthy of strong clinical attention. While some people cite peer pressure as a means to excuse themselves, for others it can be a very strong reality – especially for those who are socially isolated and themselves have a history of victimization. This study also highlights the fact that sexual gratification is the least common motive for the sexual assault by these adolescent females, which suggests that treatment directed at shaping sexual arousal or intimate behavior alone are inadequate. While it is common to read in studies that more research is needed, chief among the implications is that careful assessments of all youth who abuse are equally important.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD: This research reminds us of the importance of scientifically studying the diversity of sexual crimes. It is not enough to say that adolescent females are different from adolescent males (and also different from their older adult female counterparts). Without systematic study, it is too easy to fall back on old and shopworn assumptions about what we believe we know.

Further, this study places the societal issue of social influence front and center in our awareness. Peer influence is well established in the criminological literature. This study suggests that the role of peers and community can be either a risk or protective factor for each young person. The greater question is how each adolescent will respond.

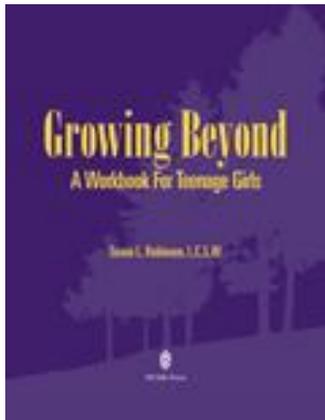
ABSTRACT: This study examined all group sexual offending cases in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2009 (n = 26) in which at least one juvenile female offender (n = 35) had been adjudicated. Information from court files showed that the majority of juvenile female group sexual offenders have (inter)personal problems and (sexual) abuse experiences. The aims of the offender groups in committing the offense could be categorized in three themes: harassing the victim, sexual gratification, and taking revenge.

The reasons why juvenile female offenders participated in a group could be categorized into group dynamics versus instrumental reasons. The findings are contrasted with findings on juvenile male group sexual offenders. Implications of the findings for research and treatment are discussed.

CITATION: Wijkman, M., Weerman, F., Bijleveld, C., & Hendriks, J. (2015). Group sexual offending by juvenile females. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 27, 335-356.

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Featured NEARI Press Resource



Growing Beyond: A Workbook for Teenage Girls

by Susan L. Robinson

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