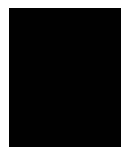


FEMALE SEX OFFENDERS IN WASHINGTON STATE

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***Washington State
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Female Sex Offenders in Washington State

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reviews the literature regarding female sex offenders, and examines the characteristics of convicted female sex offenders in Washington State. Research literature indicates that the prevalence of sex offenses committed by females is relatively low, partly because of underreporting. Compared to their male counterparts, female sex offenders are more likely to be younger, have lower social-economic status, and offend against children. Female sex offenders are less likely to use physical force in committing their offenses. Many female sex offenders committed sex offenses accompanied or coerced by a male partner. Many of these characteristics of the female sex offenders are identified among female sex offenders in Washington State.

INTRODUCTION

Research on sex offenses committed by females is limited. Current knowledge relies largely upon case studies reported by clinicians. Although these studies provide some valuable information, their findings cannot be generalized to the complete population of female sex offenders.

This report reviews the literature regarding female sex offenders and examines the characteristics of convicted female sex offenders in Washington State.

Literature Review

PREVALENCE AND REPORTING

To date, the most widely cited figures regarding the prevalence of sex abuses committed by females were reported by Finkelhor and Russell (1984). Based on findings of the National Incidence Study on child abuse, which sampled 26 representative counties in the United States, Finkelhor and Russell estimated that 24 percent of the male victims and 13 percent of the female victims had been abused by a female perpetrator, who either acted alone or with a male partner. When results from other surveys were integrated, the two researchers estimated that about 20 percent of the male child victims and five percent of the female child victims had been abused sexually by women.¹ The researchers pointed out that the large majority of sexually abused children are girls, thus the absolute number of girl victims abused by females is larger than that of boy victims abused by females.

Based on clinical data, Groth (1979) reported that only one percent of the child molesters that he had encountered were females. He suggested that this extremely low prevalence of sexual abuse by females may be the result of under-reporting for several reasons (Finkelhor and Russell 1984):

- 1) Women may “mask sexually inappropriate contact with a child through the guise of bathing or dressing the victim;”
- 2) The sexual offenses of females are “more incestuous in nature, and the children are more reluctant to report such contact when the offender is a parent (i.e., their mother) and someone they are dependent upon;”
- 3) It may be that boys are more frequently the targets of female offenders than girls and that “boys are less likely to report or disclose sexual victimization than girls.”

¹ These “prevalence rates” are the proportion of victims that have been sexually abused by females as compared to males. These estimated do not reflect the actual rates of people who have been sexually abused by females (victim prevalence). The actual prevalence rate is the proportion of individuals in a population who have the condition (being sexually abused) at a specific point in time. Please see Appendix 1 for further explanation of victim and offender prevalence.

In addition, some victims and offenders may not consider the contact as either sexual or abusive at the time of the offense because of its subtlety (Lawson 1993).

Nevertheless, even if female sex offenders have been underreported, research seems to support the conclusion that most sex offenses, including those against children, are perpetrated by males. Although an increasing number of female sex offenders have been seen by clinicians in recent years, the number of male sex offenders that have been reported has also increased dramatically (Finkelhor and Russell 1984).

COMPARISON OF FEMALE AND MALE SEX OFFENDERS

Research indicates that female sex offenders differ from male sex offenders in their demographic characteristics, victim preference, criminal history, types of offense, legal consequences, and treatment needs. This section summarizes the literature about these differences. It should be noted that because the reviewed literature is based on clinical studies of small sample sizes, the results may not be generalized to all female sex offenders.

Victim Age and Relationship

Sex offenses committed by females are more likely to involve young children and many offenses occur within the family. In most cases, the perpetrators are in close proximity to the victim. For example, the perpetrator could be the victim's mother, step-mother, grandmother, aunt, foster parent, sibling, cousin, baby-sitter, friend, or neighbor (Faller 1987; Marvasti 1987; McCarty 1987; and Johnson 1989).

Type of Offenses

Sex offenses committed by females include acts of fondling, digital penetration, oral copulation, and sexual intercourse (Johnson 1989). Women have been convicted of rape, and the rape victim can be either a male or a female (Brown et al. 1984). Other sexual offenses committed by females include the "hands-off" sex offenses (obscene phone calls, voyeurism, and exhibitionism), bestiality, prostitution, and child pornography (Knopp and Lackey 1987). Compared to male sex offenders, female sex offenders tend to have fewer victims in general and are less likely to use physical force in committing their offenses (Wolfe 1987).

In a research critique on mother-son sexual abuse, Lawson (1993) suggested that some cases of sexual abuse may be more subtle and "may not intentionally be sexual in nature but serve to meet the parent's emotional and/or sexual needs at the expense of the child's emotional and/or developmental needs." These subtle cases include: "allowing the son to sleep in the mother's bed; massaging the child or asking the child to massage the mother; bathing son during latency or beyond; and/or mother bathing with the child."

Characteristics of Female Sex Offenders

Compared to their male counterparts, clinical studies have indicated that as a group, female sex offenders are more likely to be younger, have lower income, and be unemployed or employed part-time at the time of the offense (Faller 1987; Allen 1990). Many female sex offenders were themselves victims of childhood sexual abuse. Clinical data indicates that 48 to 100 percent of the female sexual abusers have a history of being sexually abused during childhood (Faller 1987; Mathews¹ 1987). However, a history of being sexually abused cannot completely explain why female sex offenders commit sex crimes. In the general population, about 27 percent of women have been sexually abused during childhood, and most of these women do not commit sex crimes later in life (Finkelhor et al. 1990).

Other characteristics associated with female sex offenders include mental retardation, psychosis, drug or alcohol abuse, and other maltreatment of children (e.g., physical neglect or abuse, emotional abuse) (Faller 1987). Based on their psychological and psychiatric characteristics, Mathews (1987¹) classified female sex offenders into five subtypes:

- Exploration/exploitation (“naïve experimenter”),
- Personality disordered/severe abuse history,
- Developmentally arrested or regressed,
- Male-accompanied, and
- Male-coerced.

Mathews (1987²) reported that in 42 percent of male and 54 percent of female victims who were victimized by females, men were involved in the commission of the offense. In spite of this frequent male involvement, many women offended for their own sexual pleasure (Wolfe 1987). It was suggested that female sex offenders may be more sexually active, have higher needs for emotional and sexual fulfillment, and may experience more difficult spousal relationships than male sex offenders (Allen 1990).

In terms of their attitudes toward their offenses, female sex offenders are more reluctant than males to admit wrongfulness or sexual problems, especially those who engaged in sexual interaction with adolescent males. Some female offenders argued that the offense was committed to please a male co-offender, upon whom they were dependent (Wolfe 1987). Unlike male sex offenders, using dependency as an excuse for the offense is a characteristic specific to female sex offenders. Also, female sex offenders may be more resistant and uncooperative during police investigations. These women seemed to experience more anger and a greater sense of injustice from the “system” than do male sex offenders (Allen 1990).

Legal Consequences

Allen (1990) suggested that the legal system may treat female and male sex offenders differently. Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz (1989) suggested that sanctions against female offenders may be less strict because frequently their victims are either too young or too disturbed by the abuse, and therefore are not competent witnesses in court. Also,

the abuses are generally non-violent in nature, making physical evidence rare. Additionally, society seems to have a “double standard” toward female and male perpetrators when the victim is a teenager of the opposite sex. For example, in the case of adult women who engage in sexual relationships with adolescent males, “our society appears to give some permission for this type of sexual interaction” (Wolfe 1987). Society is less permissive in the case of a sexual relationship between an adult male and an adolescent female. This double standard may contribute to underreporting of adult female sexual abuse of adolescent males.

In contrast to this double standard, a study comparing female and male sex offenders indicated that proportionally more females had their children removed from their home than did males (Allen 1990). The researcher speculated that professionals in the system “may be perceptually biased to consider female child sexual abuse even more deviant than male child sexual abuse, and that children may be at more risk with a sexually abusive mother or female caretaker than a sexually abusive father.”

At present, however, there is insufficient data to support the notion that the legal consequences of sex offenses committed by females, such as the charge, conviction, and length of sentences, are different from those of male sex offenders.

Treatment

Because female and male sex offenders have different characteristics, Mathews (1987³) suggested that treatment programs should be specifically developed for females, although the established framework for males can be used. At present, there are few innovative approaches specifically designed for the treatment of female sex offenders (Mayer 1992). No reliable information exists on sex offense recidivism or treatment effectiveness for female sex offenders.

SUMMARY

According to the literature, only a small percentage of sex offenses are committed by females. However, the present prevalence of sex offenses committed by females may be underreported. In terms of victim and offender characteristics as compared to male sex offenders, female sex offenders are more likely to offend against related children and have lower social-economic status, but are less likely to offend after the age of 50, or use physical force in committing their offenses. Many female sex offenders committed their sex offenses accompanied or coerced by a male partner. In addition, society seems to be more lenient toward adult women who engage in sexual relationships with adolescent males than toward adult men who engage in sexual relationships with adolescent females.

Female Sex Offenders in Washington State

METHOD

Data for this analysis was obtained from the Washington State Sentencing Guidelines Commission. Variables examined include offender's age at time of sentence, race, criminal history, type of offense, and type of sentence. A total of 6,838 adult sex offenders (male and female) who were convicted between January 1985 and June 1992 were included. For a small number of offenders whose gender was unknown, the first name was used to judge the offender's gender.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 107 adult female sex offenders were convicted in Washington State during the 7½ year period. The number of females each year was small and stable., ranging from 8 in 1985 to 18 in 1988. Female offenders accounted for 1.6 percent of all sex offenders, ranging from 1.2 percent in 1991 to 2.1 percent in the first half of 1992 (Table 1).

Table 1
Female and Male Sex Offenders in Washington State, 1985-1992

Sentence Year	Female	Male	Total
1985	8	485	493
1986	14	791	805
1987	13	836	849
1988	18	967	985
1989	12	922	934
1990	16	1048	1064
1991	13	1072	1085
1992 (Jan - June)	13	610	623
Total	107 (1.6%)	6731 (98.5%)	6838

Compared to male sex offenders, the female sex offenders were younger. The median age at time of sentence was 30.4 years for female offenders and 33.2 years for male offenders. While about 5 percent of the male offenders were over the age of 62 at time of sentence and the oldest male offender was 88, the oldest female sex offender in the sample was 51. There was no significant difference in the racial composition of female sex offenders (87.5 percent white) and male sex offenders (84.3 percent white).

Criminal History

Fewer female sex offenders had a criminal history than did male sex offenders. Only one (0.9 percent) of the female sex offenders had a prior adult sex conviction, while 11.1 percent of the male sex offenders had at least one prior adult sex conviction. In addition, 8.4 percent of the female sex offenders had one or more prior non-sex felony convictions, while 20.4 percent of the male sex offenders had one or more prior non-sex felony convictions.

Type of Offense

Compared to male sex offenders, a lower percentage of female sex offenders were convicted of rape (7.5 percent of females versus 16.4 percent of males) and a higher percentage of female sex offenders offended against children (92.5 percent of females versus 83.6 percent of males²). These differences were statistically significant. Also, a lower percentage of females were convicted of violent sex offenses (43 percent of females versus 49.8 percent of males), but the difference was not statistically significant. Table 2 summarizes the offenses.

Table 2
Types of Offenses for Female and Male Sex Offenders

Offense Type	Females	Percent	Males	Percent
Rape 1, 2*	3	2.8	738	11.0
Rape 3	5	4.7	361	5.4
Rape of a Child 1, 2*	32	29.9	1644	24.4
Rape of a Child 3	16	15.0	517	7.7
Child Molestation 1*	7	6.5	774	11.5
Child Molestation 2, 3	6	5.6	368	5.5
Indecent Liberties w/ force*	4	3.7	195	2.9
Indecent Liberties w/o force	25	23.4	1610	23.9
Incest 1, 2	8	7.5	389	5.8
Other sex offenses	1	0.9	135	2.0
Total	107	100.0	6731	100.0

* violent sex offenses (Sentencing Guidelines Commission 1992).

² These percentages are estimated based on type of conviction. For conviction types that may have either an adult or a child victim, the victim is classified as a child for this analysis.

Sentencing Disposition

Since 1984, Washington State has allowed courts to use a special sentencing alternative for some first-time sex offenders convicted of felony sex offenses other than First or Second Degree Rape, and whose sentence does not exceed six years. This provision, called the Special Sex Offender Sentencing Alternative (SSOSA), allows the offender to receive community supervision and treatment in lieu of incarceration.

Of the 107 female sex offenders, 51.4 percent received SSOSA, 41.1 percent were eligible but did not received SSOSA, and 7.5 percent were not eligible. For male sex offenders, the corresponding percentages were 39.9, 38.1, and 21.9. The higher percentage of females receiving SSOSA can be explained by the higher percentage of first-time offenders. Among those who were eligible for SSOSA, about equal percentages of female and male offenders received SSOSA (55.6 percent of females and 51.2 percent of males; the difference was not statistically significant). Of those sentenced to confinement, the average sentence was 28.2 months for females and 35.1 months for males; the difference was also not statistically significant.

CONCLUSIONS

Results from this study of female sex offenders in Washington State indicate the following:

- Female perpetrators accounted for less than 2 percent of all sex offenders convicted from January 1985 to June 1992 in Washington State.
- Most convicted female and male sex offenders are white.
- Compared to their male counterparts, female sex offenders are younger, less likely to offend at an older age (after 50), and less likely to have a criminal history.
- Female sex offenders are less likely to be convicted of rape and are more likely to offend against children than male sex offenders.
- A higher percentage of female sex offenders received SSOSA than did male sex offenders, which can be attributed to the higher percentage of first-time offenders among convicted females.

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Appendix: Definitions of Victim and Offender Prevalences

The actual prevalence rate is the proportion of individual in a population who have the condition at a specific point in time. Applying this concept to sex offenses committed by females, the victim and offender prevalence rates are:

$$\text{Prevalence}_v = \frac{\text{number of victims who have been sexually abused by a female}}{\text{total population (of an age range)}} \text{ at a point in time}$$

$$\text{Prevalence}_o = \frac{\text{number of female offenders who have committed a sex offense}}{\text{total population (of an age range)}} \text{ at a point in time}$$