(Juvenile) group sex offenders: prevalence, characteristics, group processes

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Definitions

Group sex offender: who commits a sex offence with at least one co-perpetrator

Results from studies on hands-on sexual group offending:

1. On juvenile males (Hendriks)
2. On juvenile females (Wijkman)
3. On adult females (Wijkman)
4. On adults (Bijleveld & Soudijn)
prevalence

Netherlands approx. one in three of all juvenile prosecutions for hands-on sex offence -
some fluctuations

seen as ‘new’ offence committed by groups of males, but:
Prevalence (2)

Not exclusively juvenile phenomenon:
Oseretzky: 80% of all rapes group rapes (Moscow), Amir 43% of all rapes group rape (Philadelphia), 50% of all group sex offences in the NL by adult offenders

Not a new phenomenon:
Bible (‘Richteren’) mentions
Smith (2004) Renaissance Italy one third of all heterosexual rapes group rape
Prevalence (3)

Not exclusively male phenomenon:

6% of all police suspicions in NL of group sex offences female suspect (Bijleveld & Soudijn, 2008)
- distribution uneven over ages: >50% of all female suspects of group sex offence 27-50 yrs old
- towards half of all known adult female sex offenders in the NL committed offence in group (Wijkman et al., 2010)
Issues

Why the group?
   Function: protection, execution, audience, humiliation
For juveniles: why not the group?
   much juvenile delinquency committed within group
What kind of group?
Issues (2)

Group sex offenders different from solo-sex offenders?
Fewer thresholds to cross
Social skills

Criminal career: switching?
Issues (3)

Consequences
for offences?
for victims?
for judicial response?
Issues - characteristics

Group sex offenders different from solo sex offenders


Group sex offenders: ‘average’ personality profile, slightly more ‘antisocial’/deprived poverty, less psychological disturbance
Issues - characteristics (2)

Significant differences:
Juvenile solo sex offenders were
   more neurotic,
   more impulsive,
   lower social skills,
   higher thrill seeking,
   more sexual abuse victimization,
   more previous sexual offending (but older),
   more often ethnic Dutch
   more often abused children
Issues - characteristics (3)

Assumption: no cross-over (offence type switching)
Very little known Hendriks & Bijleveld (2007)
  juvenile group sex offenders -> recidivate to solo sex offence (50%)
  juvenile solo sex offenders -> no switching

So apparently some stability
Issues - characteristics (4)

Juvenile females: (Wijkman et al., 2011)

Juvenile female solo sex offenders had
- more often learning disorders
- more often had multiple caregivers
- more often had traumatic experiences
- more often committed previous sex offences
- more often abused non-peers
Issues - characteristics (5)

Adult females: (Wijkman et al., 2010)

No significance testing but:

Adult female group sex offenders appeared to often
  - be psychologically disturbed
  - abuse with their partner
  - abuse (their own) children
Issues - characteristics (6)

Adults: (Bijleveld & Soudijn, 2008)

As suspects are older, the chances increase that victims are young children

About 7% of all adult cases, three quarters of all male/female twosomes who abuse children (their own, or neighbourhood children)
Summary - characteristics (6)

Young group sex offenders: mainly peer victims
Less disturbance and deviance

‘Flips’ for older offenders: child abuse becomes more likely, and disturbance (for females) more prominent
Issues - consequences

For offences

  group sex offences by juveniles more often rape
  - juvenile males: 88% of group sex offences constituted rape against 45% of solo sex offences by juveniles
  - juvenile females: more frequently rape
  (excessive) use of violence, puzzling?
  - adults: 50% penetration
for victims
more psychological problems afterwards (Ullman, 2007), and more negative reactions from network & stigma
offenders qualify victims as ‘bad girls’ or ‘loose girls’, tendency to pick vulnerable victims from own network with few friends, who sometimes had sex with one of the group (Hendriks, 2006; Bijleveld et al., 2007)
Issues - consequences (3)

for (judicial) response:

juveniles: group complicates judicial response (Bijleveld et al., 2007), group agrees on ‘story’, threatens victim, victim dependent on group, contradicting statements on what happened, playing down of own role to auxiliary (defense strategy), confusing situation, fear of discovery non-virginhood (esp. Muslim victims, see Bellil, 2002, Mucchielli, 2006)
Issues - consequences (4)

for (judicial) response (2):

adult women: abuse often in closed family, that children can barely escape from esp. when young female offenders often relate fear of co-offender, victimization by co-offender (defense strategy?), possibly dominance and strong role of co-offender
Issues - role of the group

juvenile males most extensive study (Bijleveld et al., 2007), 24 offender groups in 47 ‘situations’, average group size 4, ‘accidental’ groups (not gangs) tested

- group explanation (group produces offence, group rewards, group pressure)
- selection explanation (by-product of selecting into a group, offence is by-product of group behaviour)
- instrumental explanation (less risky, easier to offend in group)

In general none can exclusively explain group offending
Issues - role of the group (2)

Process in which offence is carried out in/by the group:
- incremental signalling
- target convergence (almost no communication but understanding)
- establishing identity (repeated pattern)
Issues - role of the group (3)

Before the offence:
- agreement (almost 1 in 2) -> planning of sexual contact (not necessarily offence), incremental signalling
- establishing identity, i.e. recurrent group pattern in half of these
- target convergence in 1 in 3 groups
- spontaneous (out of the blue) ‘emergence’ rare
- also very little concrete planning

Groups that committed more offences always stuck to the same pattern
During the offence:
- 1 in 3 groups has a leader; consistent over multiple situations
- leadership could also revolve
- collaboration as well as individual

Offenders mention:
- group ‘pressure’ (belonging, not losing face, being a sissy)
- status (group as audience)
- excitement (sexual, also more general)
- rivalry
Issues - role of the group (5)

After the offence:
- normalizing what happened
- ‘cover’, threatening victim
- reliving the event, fun
- bragging

All in all, the group is extremely important, not for the offence to happen (although perhaps unclear because of type of data), but for the function of the offence
Issues - role of the group (6)

juvenile females (Wijkman et al., 2011)
66 juvenile female sex offenders, 60% group offence, 95% male involved, 74% female leading role
80% victims friends/acquaintances, mostly from same age group
Issues - role of the group (7)

different motives from males:

- revenge, humiliation, making fun of people (1 in 3), very little sexual motives
- group pressure, afraid to say no (almost 1 in 2)
- sexual experimentation (rare)

hidden in statements: instrumentality may be large (often a co-perpetrator commits the sexual abuse, and more humiliating)
Issues - role of the group (8)

Adult females:

Often with partner, so very different dynamics
- did not dare to refuse, afraid
- disorder
Summary - role of group (8)

Male juveniles: fun, sex, belonging, status, so: group as well as selection as well as instrumental explanation

Female juveniles: strikingly more prevalent, as a more effective tool, very little sexual motives, instrumental explanation (in two ways)

Adult females: group has different meaning, often couple with unclear dynamics
Weaknesses

Not many studies
Many on judicial data (i.e. defendants who may not say things that they judge possibly detrimental to trial outcome)
Very few long term follow-up studies
Little on cross-over
Little on etiology and treatment (‘are (esp. juvenile) group sex offenders true sex offenders?’)
Possibly heterogeneous group as well
Agenda for research

Attempt at self-reports of offence scenarios
Longer-term follow up (recidivism, criminal career, generality vs. specialization), embeddedness in more extensive criminal career
Outcome/effectiveness of treatment
Group sex offending in other settings (war)