

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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### "Sexual Re-offense Trajectories With Youths in the Child Welfare System"

#### AUTHORS

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(Please see below for full citation and abstract.)

#### THE QUESTIONS

Can assigning youth with problematic sexualized behaviors (PSBs) to particular taxonomic categories of dangerousness accurately predict their likelihood to reoffend in the future?

#### THE RESEARCH

By reviewing archival records of the Massachusetts Department of Children, the authors were able to identify 638 boys flagged between the years 1998 and 2004 as high-risk for exhibiting inappropriate, coercive, or otherwise problematic sexualized behaviors. The boys had been placed into three categories of offending behavior:

1. Early-onset/life course-persistent;
2. Adolescence-onset/adolescence-limited; or
3. Childhood-limited.

Research assistants developed abstracts for the boys by examining their criminal and case records, Sex Offender Registry Board reports, court evaluations, treatment plans, progress notes, incident reports, psychoeducational evaluations, and diagnoses. The boys were divided into three cohorts according to their age at the time of their first documented PSB:

1. Early childhood;
2. Middle childhood; or
3. Preadolescence/adolescence.

All three groups were comparable with respect to ethnic composition. Other differences and similarities between the three groups were noted, including, among others, categories such as IQ; the presence of mood, psychotic, anxiety, PTSD, and other disorders; legal histories; and cumulative time spent with biological caregivers.

Rates of sexual re-offense, defined as any new hands-on PSB perpetrated after the boys' initial evaluation, were measured for the three groups of boys within three follow-up periods: three years, five years, and seven years.

Definitive re-offense data was available for 609 of the boys and showed that in the seven-year follow-up period, 20 percent of the total number of boys had reoffended. However, there were significant differences in the reoffense rates when broken down into the age at the time of their first documented PSB category, as follows:

- Boys in the early childhood cohort - 29.3 percent reoffended
- Boys in the middle childhood cohort – 17.3 percent reoffended
- Boys in the preadolescence/adolescence cohort – 12.1 percent reoffended

## **RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The authors concluded that the re-offense rates they found were consistent with those from prior research of kids convicted as juvenile sexual offenders, but were slightly higher than the reoffense rates found in studies of non-juvenile justice involved children who participated in treatment for PSBs. They also determined that their findings were consistent with the theory that PSBs with childhood onset, like other delinquent behaviors, are more likely to persist.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

These findings highlight once again the fact that professionals working with children and adolescents with histories of problematic sexual behavior need to have specialized knowledge in a number of areas, including overall child and adolescent development, sexual development, and a deep understanding of the ecology in which these young people exist. The younger the person, the more vulnerable they are to the influences of others, including caretakers. Further, this study shows the vulnerabilities of much of the existing research in our field. Focusing too exclusively on studies taking place in juvenile justice settings can miss important information. For example, in this paper, the authors observe that, "Although the early childhood cohort had a much higher re-offense rate than the other groups (31.2%), the overwhelming majority (92.2%) were never adjudicated" (P. 91). This is likely due, in part, to the fact that children under ten are typically referred to child welfare rather than the legal system. However, when we consider the encouraging, low base rates reported in larger-scale analyses, it is important to

bear in mind that the continuation of problem sexual behaviors can occur in many different forms

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

Careful, informed assessment is vital, as is assessment-driven treatment. Just as young people differ from their adult counterparts, they also very often differ from one another. Sadly, in the authors' experience, adequate funding for specialized assessments within the public sector is too often lacking. Further, the scarcity of studies such as this show how little information is available to the schools that are seeking to prevent further harm. It is often easy for schools to over-react as well as under-react to the problem sexual behaviors of their students. These findings suggest that early intervention is crucial, and interventions should not resemble adult treatment programs.

This study also shows that early intervention is crucial, and interventions should not resemble adult treatment programs. While the earliest treatment programs focused on adults, often within prison settings, research consistently finds that community-based interventions that involve families are the most effective.

Finally, this study reminds us that we can aim our prevention efforts at multiple age groups, and not just the prevention of abuse by adults. In the end, sexual abuse exists in various forms across the life span, and no one form of prevention can be effective with all age groups.

### **ABSTRACT**

The present study sought to determine whether the persistence of problematic sexualized behaviors (PSBs) committed by boys in the Massachusetts child welfare system would lend support to previous taxonomies categorizing offenders as early-onset/life course- persistent, adolescence-onset/adolescence-limited, or childhood-limited in their offending behavior. We examined the persistence of PSBs in a male sample (N = 638; age range: two to 17), using a retrospective longitudinal archival design. Procedures involved a comprehensive archival review of records from the Department of Children and Families. Subsamples were established by trifurcating the sample based on age at the time of the boys' first documented PSB, resulting in age cohorts reflecting early childhood (age two to seven), middle childhood (age eight to 11), and preadolescence/adolescence (age 12–17). Results supported the hypothesis that youths who first exhibited PSBs in early childhood would produce higher sexual reoffense rates during each of three follow-up windows (i.e., three years, five years, and seven years) than youths who first exhibited such behaviors in middle childhood, or preadolescence/adolescence ( $p < 0.01$  for all group contrasts). Findings supported the distinctions of several taxonomies classifying youthful offenders in the juvenile justice system. Abuse reactivity, coping ability, and vulnerability to iatrogenic intervention effects are considered as some of many possible contributing factors.

**CITATION**

Grossi, L.M., Brereton, A., Lee, A.F., Schuler, A., Prentky, R.A. (2017). Sexual reoffense trajectories with youths in the child welfare system. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 68,81–95.