

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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By David Prescott and Alisa Klein

“Juvenile Sex Offending Through a Developmental Life Course Criminology Perspective: An Agenda for Policy and Research”

AUTHORS

Patrick Lussier (*Please see below for full citation and abstract.*)

THE QUESTIONS

Can developmental life course (DLC) criminology, a methodology that calls for sound empirical evidence in analyzing juvenile delinquency, serve as a framework to facilitate a paradigm shift towards the development of sensible policy in response to juvenile sexual offending?

THE RESEARCH

Traditionally, research and analysis around juveniles with sexual behavior problems (SBPs) has focused on the pathological traits of youth who have sexually abused, which does little to explain the origins and developmental course of their offending and could possibly lead policy makers to view all juveniles with SBPs as potential adult sexual offenders. Nor can the low rates of recidivism for juvenile sexual offending be reconciled with a traits-based approach. In contrast, the developmental life course (DLC) criminology framework incorporates into its analysis past developmental antecedents (e.g. history of sexual and nonsexual delinquency; exposure to risk and protective factors at different developmental stages) of the juveniles and views the development of juvenile sex offending behaviors as a dynamic process. The DLC perspective recognizes that empirical evidence suggests that there is no “average” JSO. That is to say, the variations among juveniles with SBPs are prevalent enough that there is no one typological category that can accurately guide theoretical, research, and policy development around these youth. And so, the DLC

framework calls for taking into account the heterogeneity of juveniles with SBPs and a need for simultaneous identification of the different developmental patterns of their offending – “a paradigm that shifts the focus from variables to individuals.” Using a DLC approach, the author examined the current body of research on developmental parameters for juvenile sex offending, such as:

- Prevalence;
- Age of onset; F
- reQUENCY;
- Persistence;
- Continuity into adulthood; and
- Versatility and specialization.

Further, the author identified two distinct juvenile sexual offending trajectories that are not currently taken into account in the development of policy, treatment models, and clinical assessment protocols: “adolescent-limited” (AL) youth, and the highrate/slow-desisters. The risk factors such as puberty, peer influence, binge drinking, delinquency involvement, sexual arousal, and opportunity for sexual offending by the AL youth, are considered transitory and specific to adolescence, so that their offending does not reflect a pattern of overwhelming deviant sexual thoughts, fantasies, or urges, nor deviant sexual preferences. AL youth are likely to desist from sexual offending quickly or even immediately. Because AL youth are hypothesized to be the vast majority of juveniles who have perpetrated a sexual offense, and they are not likely to re-offend sexually, it is important to develop policy approaches that reflect an understanding of this.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Current traits-based analysis of juveniles who have sexually offended can lead policy makers to view all juveniles as “potential adult sex offenders” and create policy responses accordingly. Because the DLC approach sheds light on the origins and developmental course of juvenile sexual offending over time, and provides concepts and processes that can inform us about the heterogeneity of the patterns of sexual offending among juveniles, it can more accurately inform policy makers about how to respond to juvenile sex offending than the current typology-based portrayal of all JSOs as potential adult sexual offenders. The author concludes that, indeed, the DLC criminology approach is an important organizing framework to use to guide policy responses to youth at risk to offend and for those who have committed sexual offenses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

For professionals working at the front lines, the most important element of Lussier’s paper may be that not only are adolescents who have abused a heterogeneous population, but many of them desist from further sexual abuse almost immediately. Likewise, assessors and treatment programs that rightly focus on building better, harm-free lives often focus more on the immediate future and risk for specific crimes without fully taking into account the

slower desistance process that Lussier describes; some youth take longer to mature than others. To this end, professionals would be wise to keep in mind that not only do the majority of youth who abuse desist, but they often desist at different rates, and that not every rule violation indicates a lifetime of criminality. Likewise, this paper observes – once again – that not all youth who abuse do so due to abuse-specific sexual interests. Professionals of the past were understandably on the lookout for evidence of persistent sexual deviance. This paper reminds us of the need for comprehensive assessment and understanding of each youth; they are not all the same.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Early research efforts – like our assessment and treatment processes – focused on the most seemingly “pathological” aspects of youth who sexually abuse. This was to be expected at a time when people had little information to assist their strong desire to end abuse. This paper is a reminder that knowledge of strengths, assets, and other protective factors is vital in assessment-driven treatment. In fact, all of the published research has pointed to the continued need for focused inquiry and innovation in this area. Finally, as research progresses, this paper shows that it is important to expand our research efforts beyond risk and protective factors to a deeper understanding of how these factors interact. Further, it points to the importance of understanding the processes underlying these factors and their interactions. In other words, it is vital to understand and appreciate the narrative unfolding of risk and protective factors in the lives of young people who abuse.

ABSTRACT

Current American policies and responses to juvenile sex offending have been criticized for being based on myths, misconceptions, and unsubstantiated claims. In spite of the criticism, no organizing framework has been proposed to guide policy development with respect to the prevention of juvenile sex offending. This article proposes a developmental life course (DLC) criminology perspective to investigate the origins, development, and termination of sex offending among youth. It also provides a review of the current state of knowledge regarding various parameters characterizing the development of sex offending (e.g., prevalence, age of onset, frequency, persistence, continuity in adulthood, and versatility). The review highlights some heterogeneity across these developmental parameters suggesting the presence of different sex offending patterns among youth. In fact, it is proposed that, based on the current knowledge, such heterogeneity can be accounted for by a dual taxonomy of adolescents involved in sexual offenses: (a) the adolescent-limited and (b) the high-rate/slow-desister. The DLC criminology approach and the dual taxonomy are proposed as organizing frameworks to conduct prospective longitudinal research to better understand the origins and development of sex offending and to guide policy development and responses to at-risk youth and those who have committed sexual offenses.

CITATION

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