



# Adolescent Sexual Offenders

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## The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

### Who Are Adolescent Sexual Offenders?

The adolescent sexual offender is defined as a youth, from 12 to 17 years of age, who commits any sexual act with a person of any age, against the victim's will, without consent, or in an aggressive, exploitative or threatening manner.<sup>1</sup>

### How Widespread Is the Problem?

It is not possible to accurately estimate the prevalence of adolescent sexual offences as there are no official national statistics on the problem. Furthermore, it is only within the last few years that service providers, researchers, police and correctional officials have begun to recognize and address the seriousness of this problem.

What is known about the prevalence of adolescent sex offending is that:

- nationally, nearly one quarter of all sexual offences are perpetrated by adolescents;<sup>2</sup>
- in Ontario, between 1979 and 1984, nearly 1400 people between the ages of 16 and 19 were convicted for one or more sexual offences;<sup>3</sup>
- in Metropolitan Toronto alone, 151 adolescents (149 males and 2 females) ranging in age from 12 to 17 were charged with sexual offences in 1985;<sup>4</sup>
- a population survey done for the Badgley Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children found that almost one third of suspected or known child sex offenders were under the age of 21.<sup>5</sup>

Sexually assaultive behaviour by adolescents is so vastly under-reported that the few figures which do exist significantly under-represent the extent of the problem.

*Adolescent sexual offences are under-reported because:*

- Until recently adolescent sex offences were usually handled as assault charges rather than as sexual offences; thus, arrest records misrepresented the actual extent of the problem.
- Sexually abusive acts committed by adolescents are often downplayed or dismissed as sexual curiosity or experimentation. Professionals called upon to intervene in these cases often minimize the behaviour rather than treating it as a sexually deviant offence.
- The desire to protect adolescents from what has often been viewed as a harmful label extends into the criminal justice system; plea bargaining has allowed adolescent offenders to plead guilty to a simple assault, or even a property crime, rather than be convicted of a sexual offence.
- Victims are hesitant to disclose assaults because of fears, of their parents' reaction, of being stigmatized, of being blamed for the incident, or of possible reprisals by the offender.
- Sex offenders very rarely refer themselves for treatment.

## **Facts to Consider**

### *Characteristics of the Offender*

- No single profile describes all adolescent offenders. All economic groups, all levels of intelligence, all races, and all religions are represented in the backgrounds of adolescent sexual abusers.
- Adolescent offenders can sometimes be loners, isolated from their own peer group, preferring to play with younger children. They tend to have a limited work history, to be under-achievers and generally immature in most areas of functioning.<sup>6</sup>
- A large percentage of offenders experience a variety of social and behavioural problems at school.
- Adolescent sexual offenders view their world as being basically antagonistic. Their abusiveness can be understood in part as a reflection of their need to retaliate against a world they perceive to be hostile toward them.<sup>7</sup>
- A recent Toronto study reveals that adolescent offenders are being identified earlier, sometimes as young as 12 years of age. The younger adolescents tend to engage in less violent sexual offences than older adolescents, though this too is changing.<sup>8</sup>
- There are probably more female adolescent offenders than current

research suggests, but to date the vast majority of abusers who have been identified are male.

- From January 1984 to July 1986, the Metropolitan Toronto Police received 349 reports of alleged sexual offences by adolescents. Approximately 98% of the alleged offenders were male and 2% were female.
- Adolescent sex offenders are not, as many assume, strangers hiding in the shadows. In most cases, they are well known to their victims, as family members, neighbours, babysitters or friends.
- When confronted about their sexually abusive behaviour, adolescent offenders characteristically respond with denial and minimization and routinely blame their victims.

#### *Previous Victimization*

- One of the few Canadian studies on this subject revealed that one third of the adolescent offenders interviewed had experienced an abusive or neglectful childhood.<sup>9</sup>
- A United States study on adolescent sexual offenders found that over 60% had been physically abused, almost half had been sexually assaulted and 70% had been subject to neglect, while over half the sample had experienced a combination of these forms of abuse as children.<sup>10</sup>
- Child sexual abuse victims are at a greater risk of offending than are non-victims. However, while previous victimization is a contributing factor,

it is not the cause of adolescent sexual offending. Most victims do not go on to abuse other children.

#### *Characteristics of the Offence*

- Offenders are usually older than their victims. However, in a significant number of cases, the victim is older than the offender. This suggests that strictly defining the offence in terms of the age difference between the victim and the offender can be misleading.
- Sexually abusive behaviour does not suddenly manifest itself in adolescence. The offender often has a well-established history of sexually aggressive or exploitative behaviour, though in most instances the assaults have been ignored, minimized or excused as sexual experimentation and left unreported.
- In most cases, the sexual act that has brought the young person to the attention of the authorities is not an isolated one. A study done in Toronto discovered that almost half of the offenders surveyed had previously committed one or more sexual offences.<sup>11</sup>
- Threats and physical force are used most frequently against older victims, while a less violent abuse of power and authority is usually used with younger victims.<sup>12</sup>
- The older the offender, the greater is the likelihood that a charge will be laid for sexual assault.

## **What Can We Do to Prevent Adolescent Sexual Offences?**

- Encourage convicted adolescent offenders who are put on probation or placed in appropriate residential settings to participate in offence-specific assessment and treatment.
- Provide sex education courses in school with a focus on positive sexuality, addressing the issues of consent, equality and coercion. Several researchers have identified a lack of appropriate sex information or education as a possible contributing factor to incestuous offending.<sup>13</sup>
- Teach victims of sexual assault how to accept and resolve their feelings about having been abused; this may help reduce the likelihood of their becoming offenders.
- Ensure that sexual assaults committed by adolescents are treated with the same concern and care as those perpetrated by adult offenders.
- Treat every incident of sexual assault by an adolescent as an indication that the offender may have been sexually abused. The possibility of previous victimization needs to be assessed in any effort to treat the adolescent and to prevent a recurrence of the abuse.
- Ensure that specialized, accessible and prompt assessment and treatment services are available for offenders and recognize that there are no fast and easy solutions to the problem.
- Recognize that many adult sexual offenders began their abusive

behaviour when they were very young. This highlights the importance of providing effective treatment services to adolescent offenders.

- Ensure that all offenders are thoroughly assessed by specially trained professionals and provide treatment and follow-up counselling where indicated.
- Emphasize the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to intervention with adolescent sexual offenders. Effective treatment requires cooperation and open communication between all the professionals involved with the offender.
- Provide specialized training for police, social workers, probation officers, psychologists and other professionals who work with adolescent sex offenders.

## **Suggested Reading**

- *A Comprehensive Service - Delivery System with a Continuum of Care for Adolescent Sexual Offenders*, by Steven M. Bengis. 1986.
- *Adolescent Sex Offenders: A Tracking Study*, by Frederick Mathews and Lillian Stermac. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1989.
- *Adolescent Sex Offenders: Towards a Profile*, by Lillian Stermac and Frederick Mathews. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1987.

- *National Inventory of Treatment Programs For Child Sexual Abuse Offenders*, by M. Catherine Ryerse. Ottawa: Canadian Child Welfare Association, 1989.
- *The Youthful Sex Offender: The Rationale And Goals Of Early Intervention And Treatment*, by Fay Honey Knopp. Syracuse, N.Y.: Safer Society Press, 1985.
- *Working with the Adolescent Sex Offender: Proceedings of the Training Intensive for the Treatment of Adolescent Sex Offenders Workshop*. Ottawa: Canadian Child Welfare Association, 1988.

*Audio-visual:* The Family Violence Prevention Division of Health and Welfare Canada has compiled over 50 films and videos on family violence, which can be borrowed free of charge through the regional offices of the National Film Board.

### **Endnotes**

1. Gail Ryan, *Annotated Bibliography: Adolescent Perpetrators of Sexual Molestation of Children, Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 10, 1986, p. 131.
2. Frederick Mathews, *Adolescent Sex Offenders: A Needs Study* (Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services), 1987, p. 1.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Robin Badgley *et al.*, *Sexual Offences Against Children* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1984), p. 847.

6. Lois H. Pierce and Robert L. Pierce, "Juvenile Sex Offenders (1985)," unpublished paper presented at the 1987 New Hampshire Conference on Family Violence.
7. Leslie Margolin, "A Treatment Model for the Adolescent Sex Offender," *Journal of Offender Counselling, Services and Rehabilitation*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1-2, Fall/Winter 1983, p. 3.
8. Mathews, p. 18.
9. George A. Awad, Elisabeth Saunders and Judy Levene, "A Clinical Study of Male Adolescent Sexual Offenders," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1984, p. 107.
10. Pierce, p. 5.
11. Elisabeth Saunders, George A. Awad, and Georgina White, "Male Adolescent Sexual Offenders: The Offender and the Offense," *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 31, August 1986, p. 543.
12. Lillian Stermac and Frederick Mathews, *Adolescent Sex Offenders* (Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1987), p. 6.
13. M.S. Kaplan, J.V. Becker, and J. Cunningham-Rathner, "Characteristics of Parents of Adolescent Incest Perpetrators: Preliminary Findings," *Journal of Family Violence*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1988, pp. 189-90.

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