

Study: Most female child molesters were victims of sexual abuse

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A University of Georgia study that is the first to systematically examine a large sample of female child molesters finds that many of them were themselves victims of sexual abuse as children.

The finding, published in the April issue of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, has the potential to help break the cycle of abuse by improving treatment for offenders and their young victims.

“This study informs us about the pathway to becoming sexually deviant for females,” said study author Susan Strickland, assistant professor in the UGA School of Social Work. “With that knowledge, we can improve treatment and reduce the likelihood of future sexual assaults on children.”

Strickland said the sexual abuse of minors by women has been largely ignored by the general public, the legal system and by academic researchers. Many people believe that women are not capable of committing such acts, she said, and the abuse of boys by women is often dismissed as the boys sowing their oats or even being lucky. The truth is that both boys and girls are molested by female perpetrators and these victims often suffer a myriad of consequences affecting their sexuality, relationships and beliefs about themselves and others. Childhood sexual abuse also has been linked to a host of emotional and behavioral problems, such as substance abuse and eating disorders.

The true prevalence of female sexual abuse on children is unknown, but a commonly accepted figure is that five to seven percent of sex crimes are committed by females. Studies on female sex offenders are rare, and most have been descriptive in nature, used small samples and have not used valid statistical measures or control groups.

Strickland’s study, the largest of its kind, surveyed 130 incarcerated females - 60 of which were sex offenders and 70 of which were nonsexual

offenders - and examined factors such as childhood trauma, substance abuse, emotional neediness and personality disorders. While the majority of both groups reported being the victims of childhood maltreatment, the sex offenders were significantly more likely to experience pervasive, serious and more frequent emotional abuse, physical abuse and neglect.

“We’ve pretty much known that the majority of women in prison have had bad childhoods and that many suffered childhood sexual abuse,” Strickland said. “But the subgroup of female sex offenders has suffered significantly more abuse, particularly sexual abuse.”

Sex offenders also exhibited more social and sexual insecurities, inhibitions and inferiorities. Strickland said the findings suggest that many female sex offenders struggle with relationships and lack the social skills to have their needs met with consensual adult partners. Therefore, treatment for female sex offenders should address their past trauma and focus on developing appropriate social skills and increasing arousal to appropriate sexual and emotional encounters.

Because victims are at increased risk of becoming abusers later in life, Strickland said their treatment should include offender prevention therapy, which addresses issues of power and control, appropriate sexual expression and boundaries, and cycles and triggers that may lead to offending behaviors.

“While it appears that only a minority of girls who are sexually abused become offenders,” Strickland said, “we can reduce that number and reduce the potential for further sexual assaults on children – both male and female – by including offender prevention in our treatment protocols.”

Source: University of Georgia

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